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## Argument: Is Television Promoting Sexuality in Children?

Television has become one of the most easily accessible ways for children and adolescents to learn about sexuality. The exposure of American children to soap operas and sex shows on TV constantly increases. Children and adolescents are extremely susceptible to sexual messages broadcast on television. Very often, children and adolescents replace with TV programs other important activities. In this situation, it comes as no surprise that children and adolescents develop and change their sexual behaviors. Television has proved to be a potent instrument of sexual behavior transformations in children. The media reinforce new sexual beliefs and stereotypes in children. Teenagers are involved in sexual relationships at an early age without measuring the consequences of their acts, such as teen pregnancy; therefore, turning off the TV will be beneficial to them because they will stop being so sexually influenced by the television content.

The influences of televised sex on children and adolescents are complex and controversial, and it is wrong to assume that these influences are entirely negative. Even if televised sexual content does have the potential to affect children's sexual behaviors, television's sex education potential should not be disregarded. "Television can also be a positive force in the sex education of youth and has the potential to affect a broad cross section of teens" (Collins et al., "Entertainment Television as a Healthy Sex Educator" 1119). In their empirical study, Collins et al. found that television could teach the risks of early sexual activity and responsibilities imposed on children by sex ("Entertainment Television as a Healthy Sex Educator" 1119). Television can teach safe sexual activities in ways that books and classroom instructions cannot, by using real-life examples with which children and adolescents can identify (Collins et al., "Entertainment Television as a Healthy Sex Educator" 1119). Recent experiences of collaboration among television producers, Hollywood script writers, and non-profit organizations have led to the emergence of sexually responsible content, such as "Felicity" shows that portray homosexual youth and teach children and adolescents how to use condoms (Brown & Keller 255). This, however, is an idealistic picture of the TV-children relationship.



In reality, television presents a distorted picture of sexuality and sexual relationships. Recent analysis of televised content suggests that, on average, children and adolescents watch almost 150 sexual behavior incidents on TV every week (Gruber & Grube 211). Gruber and Grube reviewed the current literature on adolescent sexuality and its relation to mass media and concluded that the amount of televised sexual contacts between unmarried partners was much higher than between spouses (211). To continue, 60% of music videos include sexualized content (Gruber & Grube 211). Of the remaining 40%, most videos include displays of either sexually suggestive body movements or provocative clothing (Gruber & Grube 211). The most significant finding is that sexuality on TV is always portrayed in a positive light (Gruber & Grube 211). In other words, television sends the message that being sexually active is the same as being good and normal. Unfortunately, all these messages about sexuality are stereotypical and harmful for youth (Ward 2), and it is unlikely that television will shift toward a more useful portrayal of sexuality anytime soon (Brown & Keller 256). Therefore, while television continues generating inappropriate sexual behaviors in children, it is better to reduce the amount of time they spend in front of their TV screens.

Television depicts sexuality in ways that lead to an early onset of sexual behaviors in children and adolescents. The amount of time spent with the media continues to increase, and sexually-explicit televised content further skews children's worldview (Villani 399). Sexuality on TV increases the risks of sexually inappropriate and unsafe behaviors. Televised sexuality reduces children's capacity to build and sustain productive relationships with peers (Villani 399). Soap operas and sexually-oriented TV shows expose children to the contents that cannot be appropriately processed and interpreted. As a result, children fail to distinguish the educational potential of TV from its distorted messages. They take sexual behaviors as a normal ingredient of their lives. However, children are unprepared for sexual life. They do not know how to deal with their sexual desires. Under the influence of televised sexuality, children and adolescents are willing to utilize their sexual potential to the fullest. The dangerous consequences of early sexuality are often obscured from children and adolescents' understanding.

Children's exposure to televised sexuality has proved to be an important indicator of the growing incidence of teen pregnancy in the United States. Television makes it difficult for children to consider possible consequences of their sexual activities. Although the rates of teen pregnancy have decreased remarkably since 1991, the U.S. has still the highest incidence of teen pregnancies in the industrialized world (Chandra et al. 1047). In 2002, 76.4 per 1,000 pregnancies occurred among individuals aged 15-19 (Chandra et al. 1047). Nearly 1 million of young girls 15-19



years old become pregnant each year (Chandra et al. 1047). Television plays not the last role in the development of these pregnancy trends. As previously mentioned, televised sexually-explicit content motivates an early onset in children and adolescents' sexual behaviors, and sexual activity at a younger age is much more likely to result in pregnancy. Actually, delayed onset of sexual behaviors and increased use of contraceptives has been responsible for the recent decrease in the incidence of teen pregnancy in the U.S. (Chandra et al. 1048). In the meantime, television continuously generates relaxed attitudes towards contraception. Young girls confess that the characters of their favorite soap operas would hardly use contraceptives (Chandra et al. 1050). They feel that sex without contraception is what their TV characters expect them to do. As a result, they willingly sacrifice themselves to the pressure of the distorted sexual images produced and sent by television.

In this situation, there is no way to address the sexual complications of media exposure better than to reduce the amount of time spent by children and adolescents in front of their TV sets: turning off the TV will be beneficial to them because they will stop being so sexually influenced by the media content. Although not all researchers find a direct association between TV viewing and sexual behaviors in children, it is clear that the nature of the media environments constantly changes. Television is becoming a pervasive and evergrowing phenomenon transcending all aspects of children's lives. Children watch TV in their bedrooms, living rooms and even dining rooms. The amount of sexually-explicit content on TV does not decrease, and "reducing [...] the amount of time that adolescents are exposed to this content is likely to appreciably delay the initiation of both coital and noncoital sexual activities" (Collins et al., "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior" e228). In other words, parents should try to engage their children in activities other than television viewing. Today, the range of activities available to children and adolescents is virtually unlimited. From sports and exercises to traveling and hiking, parents and children can spend their time away from TV screens and, consequentially, reduce the risks of inappropriate sexual behaviors and teen pregnancy in children.

Certainly, an appropriate balance of television viewing should be maintained. Parents may increase children's exposure to portrayals of sexual risks (Collins et al., "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior" e228). Parents and children may watch television together and discuss the feelings experienced by children while seeing sexually-explicit scenes (Collins et al. "Watching Sex on Television Predicts Adolescent Initiation of Sexual Behavior" e228). Eventually, reducing the amount of time children spend watching sexually-explicit



televised contents may be extremely problematic due to our high exposure to television, which is almost everywhere. Nevertheless, it is still the best way to reduce sexual risks among children. The commercial benefits of sexually-oriented televised contents are growing, and TV companies will hardly betray their profit-driven motives for the sake of socialization and improved sexual health among children and adolescents. Despite considerable difficulties, it is still within children and parents' capability to reduce the amount of TV sexuality in their lives.

Despite the validity of the TV-sexuality issues, the body of evidence linking televised sexuality to children's sexual behaviors is rather scarce. In 1999, against 1,000 studies linking media violence to real-life aggressiveness, only 5 studies confirmed a strong connection between media sexuality and changes in teenagers' sexual attitudes (Strasburger & Donnerstein 131). Moreover, a wide range of factors moderate the relationship between sexuality on television and sexuality in life. For example, race is an important predictor of television's psychological impact on children and adolescents: adolescents of color are at higher risk of early pubertal development than their white peers (Gruber & Thau 438). Personality features may also reduce or amplify the effects of sexualized TV content on children (Brown). Apparently, future research is needed to clarify these relationships. In the meantime, parents should control the amount of time children spend watching sexually-oriented TV scenes. This is how parents can reduce the risks of early sexual behaviors and teen pregnancy in their children.

The relationship between television and sexuality is complex and controversial. Televised sexuality has proved to be a relevant predictor of sexual behaviors in children and adolescents. Television leads to an early onset of sexuality in children and increases the risks of teen pregnancy. Under the influence of television and other mass media, children and adolescents lose control over their sexual behaviors and fail to anticipate the risks of early sexuality. In this situation, turning off the TV will be beneficial to them because they will stop being so sexually influenced by the television content. Today, the variety of activities available to children and their adults is virtually limitless. Parents may try to maintain a reasonable balance of television viewing and other activities, but with the growing pervasiveness of television this goal can become virtually unachievable. The best parents can do is to control the amount of time spent by children in front of TV screens. This is how they can reduce the risks of early sexuality and teen pregnancy in their children.



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