

# For teens, early sex and media exposure not linked

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The prevalence of sex in the mainstream media has led many researchers to study its effect on impressionable adolescents. Several published, peer-reviewed studies have indicated that there is a link between exposure to sex in the media and the early onset of sexual activity among teens. However, a study led by Temple psychologist Laurence Steinberg questions these findings.

Published this month in the online version of [Developmental Psychology](#), Steinberg's study reevaluated data from a widely publicized 2006 study published in *Pediatrics* that claimed that adolescents between 12 and 14 who consumed a large amount of sexualized media — including movies, television, music and magazines — were more likely to have sex by age 16.

But Steinberg says that the original study did not fully take into account the fact that adolescents who are already interested in sex will choose to consume more sexualized media; instead of media consumption being responsible for interest in [sexual activity](#), it's actually the other way around.

In his reevaluation, Steinberg analyzed the existing data by using a more statistically conservative approach, which controlled for adolescents' propensity to be exposed to sexualized media. That propensity was determined by factoring in data collected on other aspects of the teens' lives, including school performance, religiousness, parental relationships, and perceptions of friends' attitudes about sex. When controlling for

these additional variables, the link between exposure to sexualized media and the earlier onset of sexual activity disappears.

"There is a common problem in social science research called the third variable problem," said Steinberg. "When looking at the relation between a given behavior and given experience, it could look like there is a correlation, when in fact the relationship is dependent on something else entirely."

He uses a child's religiousness as an example: "If a child reports being very religious, he or she will be less likely to have sex at a younger age, but will also be less likely to consume sexualized media. It may look like media exposure leads to sexual activity, but the relation between the two is artificial.

[Adolescents](#) are one of the largest consumers of mass media; existing research shows they are exposed to mass media for about eight hours a day. Further, a large portion of this group is also less likely to use condoms than their older counterparts, putting them at risk for a host of health problems.

"These factors certainly warrant concern from adults," said Steinberg. "But instead of pointing a collective finger at the entertainment industry, the most important influences on adolescents' sexual behavior are probably closer to home.

"There are many reasons to find the portrayal of sex in mass media objectionable," he added. "But let's not confuse matters of taste with matters of science."

Provided by Temple University

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