

# Media not the scapegoat when it comes to teen sex

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Parents and society in general shouldn't shift the blame for young people's sexual behavior on what teens supposedly see and read in the media about intimate encounters. Proclaiming a link between such so-called sexy media and the sexual behavior of young people is in fact premature. The media neither contributes to the early initiation of sex among young people, nor to their sexual conduct more generally. So says Christopher Ferguson of Stetson University in the US, who led a thorough systematic analysis of 22 relevant studies on the topic along with colleagues Patrick Markey at Villanova University and Rune Nielsen at IT University Copenhagen. The results of this meta-analysis are published in Springer's journal *Psychiatric Quarterly*.

Parents and policy makers often raise the concern that so-called sexy media (media depicting or discussing sexual encounters) may promote sexual behavior among teenagers. No conclusive evidence has however yet been provided about the matter by researchers. Ferguson's team therefore conducted a meta-analysis of 22 previous studies that all measured the influence of some form of media on an outcome related to teenagers' sexual behaviour, such as pregnancy, risky sexual behavior or the initiation of sex. The studies in total took into account the views of more than 22,000 participants younger than 18 years old.

Only a very weak link was found between the type of media that teenagers viewed and their eventual sexual behavior. It also plays only a very minor role in the initiation of sex. The researchers do not exclude the possibility that sexy media may still influence sexual attitudes, but

say that this does not seem to carry over into actual behavior.

"Evidence for an association between media and [sexual behavior](#) is minimal," says Ferguson, who believes that parents and peers play a much greater role in how teenagers' moral values around sexuality develops. Despite increased availability of sex in the media, US government data suggests teens are waiting longer to have sex, and teen pregnancy rates are at historic lows.

The results do not exclude the possibility that media may have some influence on at-risk youth who are deprived of other socialization influences. "That is to say, when information from parents or schools are lacking, media may become the only source of information on sexuality," explains Ferguson.

He warns that simply making the media the scapegoat and giving it considerable public attention might distract parents and policy makers from more pressing and important issues related to teen sexuality. According to him, parents must be encouraged to discuss sexuality with their teens, proper sex-education programs must be implemented in schools, and ways should be examined by which peer networks can be used to promote safe sex.

"The encouraging message from our results is that the [media](#) is unlikely to thwart parental efforts to socialize children should [parents](#) take the initiative to talk directly to their children about sex," Ferguson adds.

**More information:** Christopher J. Ferguson et al, Does Sexy Media Promote Teen Sex? A Meta-Analytic and Methodological Review, *Psychiatric Quarterly* (2016). [DOI: 10.1007/s11126-016-9442-2](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-016-9442-2)

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