

The Medical Minute: How to counter media messages on sex

July 26 2011, By Rollyn Ornstein, M.D.

On television, in music videos, on the Internet and in movies, explicit sexual content is everywhere -- and children are often prime targets.

More than half of all television programming contains sexual themes. Typical American teens spend an average of seven hours a day [watching TV](#) and using various other entertainment [media](#) (including cell phones, computers, and [iPods](#)). So it's no surprise that kids are exposed to thousands of sexual references a year.

Studies published within the last five years demonstrate that, when examined over time, exposure to sexual content in TV and other forms of media in early adolescence -- especially for Caucasian teens -- can as much as double the risk of early initiation of sexual activity. Adolescents whose parents limit their TV-viewing are less likely have early sex.

Casual sex isn't just a main media theme. It's also glamorized and normalized. There are scant mentions of negative consequences such as unplanned pregnancies or sexually transmitted diseases.

It may be impossible to totally shield [children](#) from unrealistic sexual messages. Still, the American Academy of Pediatrics says, the barrage can be counteracted. By consistently sharing beliefs about respect, love, and healthy sexual choices, parents can become a strong role model for positive behavior. Parents can influence children to think critically about the prevailing media images they encounter.

To maintain healthy media habits in your home:

- **Start early.** Don't wait until children become teens to address sexual themes in the media. Talk with kids when they're young.
- **Set limits.** Just as parents restrict the number of snacks children eat, they should control the amount of time they spend with media. Make a schedule so kids know how long they can watch TV, view DVDs, use the Internet, and so on.
- **Increase your “media literacy.”** Get acquainted with your children's favorite media. Review the appropriateness of shows, games, magazines, and songs. Visit social networking sites such as Facebook. Check children's personal page for suitable content and photos.
- **Grab a “teaching moment.”** When children watch a show, take the opportunity to applaud positive behavior on screen. Start discussions about human sexuality and stable relationships.
- **Watch with your children.** To monitor kids' viewing choices, keep electronic media out of children's bedrooms. Keep it in a central area of your home.
- **Set a good example.** Parents shouldn't be watching programs or visiting websites that give the wrong message to their children.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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