

As adolescents spend more time watching, reading and engaging with media, their exposure to sexualized content is nearly inevitable. Subsequently, it is important to be aware of what types of sexualized messages adolescents are consuming and how these messages affect them.

What the Evidence Says

- Adolescents can learn through entertainment media about what is considered to be acceptable sexual behavior, and researchers have dubbed media as a “sexual super peer” that may encourage teens to be sexually active, as well as take sexual risks.¹ Mainstream media often portrays sexual relationships that are heterosexual in nature that reinforce gender stereotypes,² or objectify women.³
- Unsafe and risky sex is often glamorized in media,⁴ which can lead teens to believe that these practices are normal and risk-free.
- Sexting, in which adolescents share nude photos or sexually explicit texts, can lead adolescents to believe that sexting is the norm,⁵ and can result in cyberbullying if their nude photos are shared among their peers.⁶
- Exposure to pornography can alter how an adolescent perceives sex and body image. Studies have shown that adolescents who are exposed to pornography often have difficulties distinguishing between the fictional pornographic characters and behaviors they see, and real life sexual situations.⁷ This can lead children and adolescents to have unrealistic views of how their bodies should look, insecurities about their appearance, and anxieties about sexual performance and intimacy.⁸

Recommendations

- Help parents understand that sexual references are common in all types of media (advertisements, music, movies, etc.). Subsequently, recommend that parents take an interest in what types of media their teen is using, and how they are using it.
- Explain to parents that avoiding the topic of sexual messages depicted in media could reinforce negative stereotypes and encourage their teen to believe any misinformation presented (both in mainstream media and pornography). If they view a sexual message with their teen, encourage parents to discuss the message and to put it in the context of real life bodies, sexual behaviors, and consequences.
- Describe and provide resources to parents about how they can teach media literacy skills to their teen. Provide parents with accurate consumer health resources related to sexual behavior, and encourage parents to prepare answers to commonly asked questions about sex, especially if they are having difficulties broaching the subject of sexuality. Even for those of us in healthcare, this topic can be tricky to discuss.
- Advise adolescents about the social, emotional, and legal consequences of sexting.

Future Directions

As the body of research grows, there is more evidence to suggest that young children will continue to be exposed to sexual content in the media. We need to focus on providing youth with accurate sexual health information.

References

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Suggested Reading

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