

Families Are Talking

Teens Talk about TV, Sex, and Real Life

Young teens rank TV and other media as their top source for information about sexuality and sexual health.

A majority of parents say they have talked with their teens about a sexuality-related issue because of something one of them saw on TV.

SIECUS recently asked a group of 12- and 13-year-old students from Baltimore and 16-year-old students from Seattle for their take on TV, sex, and real life.

Some of their responses are on the right.

Show teens as responsible.

- *Do you have conversations about TV content, characters, or storylines with your parents or caregivers?*
"Sometimes."
"No."
"If my Mom sees something inappropriate, she'll talk to me about it."
"Sometimes I get concerned about what's going on so I ask my parents."
- *If you do, what messages do you receive from them?*
"Don't do any of the stupid things you see on TV."
"That it's all fake."
"That what I watch and listen to are bad influences."
- *What messages do you receive from TV about sexuality?*
"That it's all recreation and fun."
"That it's cool and good."
"Sex is not a big deal."
"The more you have it, the more you have fun."
"That it's very important to look good."
- *How do you think these messages affect young people?*
"They can influence kids to move too fast in relationships and to act 'too maturely.'"
"They make kids think sex is cool because all their favorite stars probably have something to do with sex."
"Some people may end up thinking sex isn't such a serious subject."
"They think everything on TV is true."
- *How do you think TV programs portray young people?*
"In adult movies, kids are annoying and bad. In kid movies, it's the other way around."
"They're showing bad ass kids and that's not realistic. It's making us all seem like that."
"Adolescents are portrayed as partying, crazy people."
"I don't think they know what a teenager looks like. I mean, not everyone looks like a Vogue supermodel."
"If you are smart, you are a nerd. If you are stupid, you are cool. That really gives the wrong message."
- *How would you like to see TV portray young people?*
"Show teens as responsible."
"As thoughtful people, where boys and girls aren't the only things on their minds."
"Get some ugly people on a show and let it be okay."

FROM THE EDITOR

Families Are Talking is a newsletter with information to help parents and caregivers talk to their children about sexuality and related issues.

SIECUS would like to thank the young people from Baltimore and Seattle who so generously shared their thoughts with us. We'd also like to thank Deborah Roffman of The Park School in Baltimore and Jacques Chase of Planned Parenthood of Western Washington for helping us gather this information.

Parents & TV

70 % of parents of children under 18 years old say they have had a talk about a sexual issue with their child because of something one of them saw on a TV show.

-*Sex in the 90s: Kaiser Family Foundation/ABC TV: 1998 National Survey of Americans on Sex and Sexual Health.*

45 % of parents of 8- to 12-year-olds say their child has at some point asked a question about sex, AIDS, or some other sensitive issue because of something they saw on TV.

-*1996 Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now Survey on Sex, Kids, and the Family Hour.*

63 % of parents are concerned "a great deal" that their children are exposed to too much sexual content on TV.

-*2001 Kaiser Family Foundation Survey on Parents and the V-Chip.*

64 % of parents say TV and movies have "a lot" of influence on the way their own and other children think about sex, violence, and drugs and alcohol.

-*2001 Kaiser Family Foundation and Nickelodeon Survey on Talking with Kids about Tough Issues.*

Teens & TV

24 % of teens 12 to 17 years old say they would like more information about sex and relationships from TV.

-*2001 Kaiser Family Foundation and Seventeen Survey of Teens : Teen's Opinions, Attitudes, and Awareness of Sexually Transmitted Diseases.*

Young teens 13 to 15 years old rank the entertainment media—TV, magazines, movies, and music—as the top source of information about sexuality and sexual health.

-*1997 Kaiser Family Foundation and Children Now National Surveys: Talking with Kids about Tough Issues.*

TV Can Spark Talk on Issues Like Sexuality

We all know that TV is an important source of information for young people.

As a result, they are growing up with a more sophisticated understanding of the world and its complexities.

Parents are looking for new ways to reach out to their children to improve communication on issues like sexuality, violence, and drugs.

One way to spark those important conversations on values, responsibility, and other sensitive topics is—believe it or not—TV!

Watching TV by themselves, young people may become disillusioned or view humor as truth, expect to find violence on every street corner, or think that quick encounters will lead to romantic happiness.

Watching the news, they may feel that corruption pervades every level of our society, that winning is everything, and that violence is an acceptable way to express frustration.

Parents should clarify these messages and teach their children their own values. But to do that, they have to open lines of communication on sensitive subjects like sexuality. And TV is an excellent way to do it.

When parents watch shows that their children watch, they will find new ways to start those sensitive conversations. They will learn what amuses their children as well as what distresses them.

In the end, watching—and talking—together will become more important than what they watch!

Adapted with permission from Talking with TV: A Guide to Starting Dialogue with Youth published by Advocates for Youth in Washington, DC. For more information, go to www.advocatesforyouth.org



What Is Media Literacy?

Media literacy is defined as knowing how to interpret and evaluate messages from the media—TV, magazines, movies, newspapers, and the Internet.

What's Grabbing Teens' Attention on TV?

A variety of TV show formats are grabbing teens' attention:

Talk shows. Young people are getting an earful and eyeful of social, health, and relationship information!

News and entertainment shows. Starting early in the morning and running late into the night, graphic discussions and provocative stories fill the TV screen. How are young people sorting these different opinions?

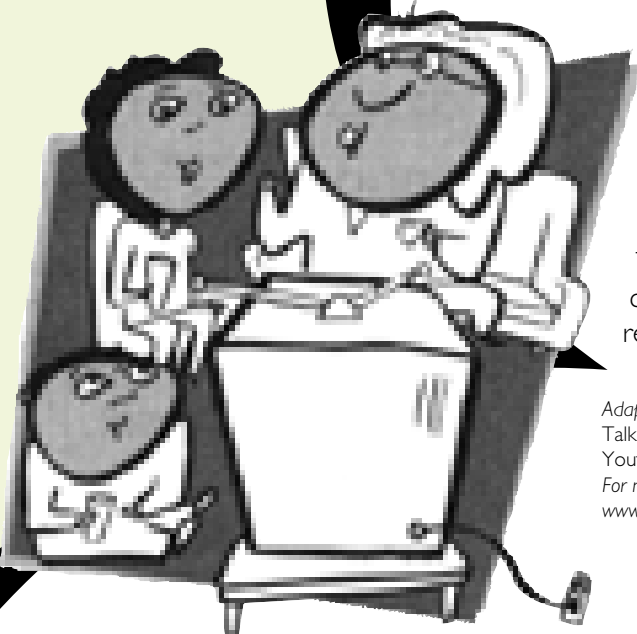
Music videos. Although most videos last only a few minutes, the combination of the music and the visuals send powerful and provocative messages about sexuality.

Educational programs. Viewers are watching everything from surgery in the emergency room to court trials to documentaries to museum exhibits. Sharing talks about these shows broadens everyone's horizons.

Feature films. These dramas and comedies are main fare for many TV stations. They are popular with both teens and adults.

The bottom line is that TV gets attention. With the right opening, parents and caregivers can provide facts and opinions about responsible and loving relationships and prevention topics.

*Adapted with permission from
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Youth published by Advocates for Youth in Washington, DC.
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Sexual Content on TV

68 % of all TV shows other than news, sports, and children's shows contain sexual content. On broadcast TV, 75 % of network prime-time shows contain either sexual dialogue or sexual behavior. *-2001 Kaiser Family Foundation Report: Sex on TV*

For copies of this report, contact the Kaiser Family Foundation at 800/656-4533 or visit www.kff.org.

TV Talk Tips for Parents and Caregivers

1. **Watch what your children watch.** Do this as often as you can. Also review TV listings and suggest shows that you would like to watch with them.
2. **Watch the first time without offering any opinions.** Sit back, relax, and take in what you see and hear. You'll learn what your children like.
3. **Ask your child's opinion.** "How do you feel about...?" "What do you think...?"

- You have begun to nurture the thinking and skills that will help your children question media messages.
4. **Share your opinions and values in a positive way.** Discuss your thoughts. Your children need to understand your values as they begin to form their own.
 5. **Watch for "teachable moments."** Use the opportunity of a joke or a tender scene to discuss a subject.
 6. **Use commercial time to talk.**

- Take this time to communicate your own brief message. Your children may pay more attention during a break in the show.
7. **Remember that "bad" shows can provoke discussion, too.** They will often give you the opportunity to discuss the behavior of a certain character.
 8. **Be sensitive.** Your children might find it embarrassing for you to discuss sexuality issues in front of their friends or other adults.
 9. **Use keys to good communication.** As you're talking, encourage give and take.

- Use such phrases as "What do you think?" "That's a good question." "I don't know, but I'll find out." "I'm glad you told me about that."
10. **Have fun!** Keep your talks informal. Avoid lectures. Seek input. Your children will build barriers against criticism.

*—Adapted with permission from
The Media Project, a partnership
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Tamara Kreinin
President & CEO

Monica Rodriguez
Director of Information and Education

Mac Edwards and Amy Levine
Editors

Alternatives
Layout

Families Are Talking is published by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States, a national nonprofit organization founded in 1964 to affirm that sexuality is a natural and healthy part of living. SIECUS develops, collects, and disseminates information; promotes comprehensive education about sexuality; and advocates the right of individuals to make responsible sexual choices.

SIECUS
130 West 42nd Street, Suite 350
New York, NY 10036-7802
Phone: 212/819-9770
Fax: 212/819-9776

1706 R Street, N.W.
Washington, DC 20009
Phone: 202/265-2405
Fax: 202/462-2340

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Web Site**

We invite you to visit www.familiesaretalking.org for more information and resources. The Spanish web site www.lafamiliahabla.org is currently under construction.

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Illustrations are by Dominic Cappello coauthor of *Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Sex and Character* (with Pepper Schwartz, Ph.D.), *Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Drugs and Choices* (with Xenia Becher, M.S.W.) and the author of *Ten Talks Parents Must Have With Their Children About Violence*.

For more information on the *Ten Talks* parent-child communication trainings on sexuality, character, violence, and drugs, see www.tentalks.com

A Fun Way to Talk about Music Videos and Their Messages

Music videos send powerful messages to young people about many topics including sexuality.

When watching music videos, we often don't think twice about what we see or hear. Other times, we may talk with our family about the messages and clarify our values, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes.

Here is a fun activity to encourage family conversation.

1. **Record a few music videos** from MTV, VH-1, BET, or another channel.
2. **Watch one of the videos with the volume turned off.**
3. **Talk about what you saw.** Discuss the images and messages.
4. **Play the video with the sound turned on.** If the lyrics are difficult to understand, write them on a piece of paper. (You can usually find lyrics on the Internet.)
5. **Talk about both the lyrics and the images.** Did they send the same message? If not, what are the conflicting messages?

Based on an activity developed by media educator Mary Byrne Hoffman.

Taking Charge of Your TV

"Taking Charge of Your TV"—sponsored by the National PTA, Cable in the Classroom, and the National Cable & Telecommunications Association—addresses concerns about TV as well as the impact of TV violence and commercialism on young people. It offers free resources for parents, caregivers, and educators, including these three videos:

1. **Taking Charge of Your TV**
2. **Tools to Use to Help You Choose:
A Family Guide to the TV Ratings System**
3. **TV Smarts for Kids**

For more information:
"Taking Charge of Your TV"
Cable in the Classroom
1800 N. Beauregard Street, Suite 100
Alexandria, VA 22311
Phone: 800/743-5355
Web site: www.ciconline.com/section.cfm/7166

