CHAPTER 6

Sexuality and the Media

Sexually speaking, playing catch-up is what being a teenager is all about, and movies like American Pie are, by now, an essential part of the ritual.

—Entertainment Weekly critic Owen Glieberman (1999, pp. 43–44)

By baring a single breast in a slam-dunk publicity stunt of two seconds’ duration, [Janet Jackson] also exposed just how many boobs we have in this country. We owe her thanks for a genuine public service.


One erect penis on a U.S. screen is more incendiary than a thousand guns.

—Newsweek critic David Ansen (1999, p. 66)

Something’s in the air, and I wouldn’t call it love. Like never before, our kids are being bombarded by images of oversexed, underdressed celebrities who can’t seem to step out of a car without displaying their well-waxed private parts to photographers.

—Lead article, Newsweek, February 12, 2007 (Deveny & Kelley, 2007, p. 40)

The paradox of health values in America today is clearly illustrated by the fact that cigarettes, which are known to cause disease, are prominently advertised in the press, while condoms, which prevent disease, are not considered suitable for advertisements.

In the absence of widespread, effective sex education at home or in schools, television and other media have arguably become the leading source of sex education in the United States today (Strasburger, 2005). As one noted researcher observes, “Long before many parents begin to discuss sex with their children, answers to such questions as ‘When is it OK to have sex?’ and ‘With whom does one have sexual relations?’ are provided by messages delivered on television” (Kunkel, Cope, & Biely, 1999, p. 230) (see Figure 6.1). This is a rather sad commentary, considering that American media are arguably the most sexually suggestive and irresponsible in the world. Although other countries may show more nudity, only American media titillate their viewers with countless jokes and innuendoes about all aspects of human sexuality. Yet although advertisers are using sex to sell virtually everything from hotel rooms to shampoo, the national networks remain reluctant to air advertisements for birth control products (see Figure 6.2).

Unfortunately, the body of research about how children and teenagers learn about sexuality from the media and whether it affects their behavior is slim at best (J. D. Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002; J. D. Brown & Strasburger, 2007; Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; Gruber & Grube, 2000;

Figure 6.1

SOURCE: Jeff Stahler, Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc. Reprinted with permission.
Huston, Wartella, & Donnerstein, 1998; Malamuth & Impett, 2001). However, three new studies indicate that the media are probably a major force to be reckoned with in considering when teens begin having sex (Ashby, Arcari, & Edmonson, 2006; J. D. Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004).

On television each year, American children and teenagers view nearly 14,000 sexual references, innuendoes, and behaviors, few of which (less than 170) involve the use of birth control, self-control, abstinence, or responsibility (L. Harris & Associates, 1988). The most recent content analysis of television found that more than 75% of prime-time shows on the major networks contain sexual content, but only 14% of incidents include any mention of the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity or the need for contraception (see Figure 6.3). This figure rises to 27% for shows depicting or implying intercourse, however (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005). Since the 1997–1998 season, the amount of prime-time sexual content has increased from 67% to 77%, but there has been only a slight increase in the responsible content (Eyal, Kunkel, Biely, & Finnerty, 2007; Kunkel et al., 1999). Movies and sitcoms contain the most sexual content (Kunkel et al., 2005). In fact, talk about sex or sexual behavior can occur as often as 8 to 10 times per hour of prime-time television (Kunkel, Cope, & Colvin, 1996).

Prime-time television is also very popular with teenage viewers, and much of what they see contains appreciable sexual content, according to three separate content analyses. In 19 prime-time shows viewed most often by 9th and 10th graders, just under 3 sexual references per hour occurred, usually long kisses or unmarried intercourse (Greenberg, Stanley, et al., 1993). In action adventure

Figure 6.2
SOURCE: Jeff Stahler, Newspaper Enterprise Association, Inc. Reprinted with permission.
series, most of the sex involved either unmarried intercourse or prostitution (Greenberg, Stanley, et al., 1993). Ward (1995) found that one fourth of all verbal interactions on prime-time series watched by teens contained sexual content. Most recently, an analysis of the sexual messages in the top 15 shows according to Nielsen ratings of teenage viewers found that two thirds contain sexual talk or
Figure 6.3  Results From the Only Ongoing Content Analysis of Sexual Content on TV

SOURCE: Kunkel et al. (2005). This information was reprinted with permission from the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation. The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is a nonprofit, private operating foundation focusing on the major health care issues facing the nation and is not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries.

NOTE: Not only is there a lot of sexual content on mainstream American television, but most of it does not deal with the risks and responsibilities of sexual activity.
behavior, with intercourse depicted in 7% of the programs (see Tables 6.1–6.3) (Cope-Farrar & Kunkel, 2002).

Table 6.1   Most Popular Shows Viewed by Teens (12- to 17-Year-Olds)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>American Idol</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Simpsons</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Desperate Housewives</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Survivor: Palau</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>CSI: Crime Scene Investigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>The O.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Family Guy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Survivor: Vanuatu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>One Tree Hill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Nanny 911</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Lost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>That 70s Show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14.</td>
<td>WWE: Smackdown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>7th Heaven</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 6.2   Sexual Content in Teens’ Favorite Prime-Time Programs (n = 37 programs studied)

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of programs with any sexual content</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of scenes per program with sexual content</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average number of scenes per hour containing sexual content</td>
<td>7.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Data from Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2002).
All of this talk about sex and sexual behavior on television (see Figure 6.4) contrasts dramatically with the fact that in the new millennium, adolescent sexuality and sexual activity—teen pregnancy, AIDS, other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), and abortion—have all become battlegrounds in the public health and political arenas (R. T. Brown & Brown, 2006). With nearly 900,000 teen pregnancies a year and with the highest rate of STDs occurring among adolescents, the United States leads all Western nations in such statistics (see Figure 6.5) (Child Trends, 2006; Henshaw, 2004). Teen pregnancy costs the nation an estimated $21 billion a year, although the rate has been decreasing during the past decade (Miller, 2000). By age 17, nearly two thirds of males and one half of females have begun having sexual intercourse (see Table 6.4) (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2006). Nearly one third of sexually experienced teen females have been pregnant (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2006). And a sexually active American teenager has a one in four chance of contracting an STD (Kirby, 1997).

### Table 6.3 Themes of Sexual Responsibility in Teens’ Favorite Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>% of All Scenes With Sexual Content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Saying no/waiting/keeping virginity</td>
<td>8.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking “precautions”</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative consequences of sex</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scenes without the above scenes</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 6.4 Sexual Behavior Among U.S. High School Students, 2005 (N = 13,953) (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Female Ever Had Sexual Intercourse</th>
<th>Male Ever Had Sexual Intercourse</th>
<th>Female First Sex Before Age 13</th>
<th>Male First Sex Before Age 13</th>
<th>Female Four or More Lifetime Sex Partners</th>
<th>Male Four or More Lifetime Sex Partners</th>
<th>Female Condom Use at Last Sex</th>
<th>Male Condom Use at Last Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>252</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2006).
So what is shown on American television is largely unrealistic, unhealthy, suggestive sexual behavior or sexual innuendoes (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2001; Hochman, 2008; Malamuth & Impett, 2001; Strasburger, 2005). It is sex as a casual pastime, a romp in the hay, with little or no consequences. What is meant by content that is sexually suggestive? A few examples will suffice:

- The famous sitcom Seinfeld repeated the abstinence plotline later in the 1990s, with a story about who could be “the master of his own domain” by going without masturbating for the longest period of time. Seinfeld also had a notorious story involving Jerry confusing a girlfriend’s name for a part of the female pelvic anatomy (which later became part of a sexual harassment lawsuit in real life).

- In the late 1990s, a rash of teenage sitcoms appeared on prime-time TV. In Popular, a mom confronts her daughter and soon-to-be stepdaughter: “One of you is thinking of Doing It, if not already Doing It.” In That ’70s Show, one dim teenager asks, “Why cuddle when you can Do It?” These, along with several others representing the new generation of shows for teens, have been termed “Happy Days With Hormones” (K. Tucker, 1999).

- HBO’s hit, Sex and the City, featured four single women who can never seem to get enough sex or talk enough about it. Various conversations have dealt with oral sex, anal sex, spanking, and other fetishes (Jacobs & Shaw, 1999). Nudity is not uncommon. Curiously, for a show that is so explicit, the risks of casual sex and the need for birth control are rarely mentioned. When the show switched to TBS in 2004, much of the raunchy sex language had to be cut.
Birth and abortion rates among teenage women in selected OECD countries, expressed per 1000 women aged 15–19 (data are for 1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Births</th>
<th>Abortions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>6.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>9.8</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>18.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak Republic</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>23.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>29.6</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>33.4</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>55.6</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.5  The United States Continues to Have the Highest Teen Pregnancy Rate in the Western World


NOTE: Between 1990 and 2000, the teen pregnancy rate for 15- to 19-year-olds decreased 28% to 84 pregnancies per 1,000 females. This is thought to be more due to the use of contraception than the impact of abstinence-only programs. However, the teen birth rate increased 3% from 2005 to 2006, the first increase in 15 years (Stobbe, 2007).
FOX’s *War at Home* premiered in 2003 with an episode in which Dave, the main character, introduces his wife to the viewers by saying, “Did you check out that rack? Nice, huh?” He tells the viewing audience that he only has one rule for guys dating his teenager daughter: “If she sees your penis, I’ll cut it off.” Later that season, Dave buys his teenage son a lubricant because he is so sore from masturbating.

In 2007, suggestiveness turned into explicitness for several cable shows. The HBO series *Tell Me You Love Me*, the Showtime series *Californication*, and the TNT series *Saving Grace* have all “pushed the envelope” with scenes of nudity and intercourse (Battaglio, 2007).

By contrast, consider the various messages and information presented in the following synopsis of a 1996 episode of *Malibu Shores* (Kunkel et al., 1999):

Two teenagers are making out on the couch. Zach wants to have intercourse, but Chloe is not sure. He moves his hand underneath her shirt but she pushes it away, explaining “a month from now I don’t want to be taking a pregnancy test.” Zach says that he will use “protection” but Chloe says she’s afraid that “protection” is not 100% effective. A friend of hers had a recent pregnancy scare. Finally, Zach says, “It’s OK. I can wait. As long as it takes. I can wait. I don’t want you to do something you’re not ready to do.” (*Malibu Shores*, NBC, March 30, 1996)

A distinct minority of TV shows in the past 10 to 15 years have wrestled successfully with sexual responsibility. Beginning with *Beverly Hills 90210*, the character of Donna (played by Tori Spelling) maintained her virginity throughout high school, when everyone else was losing theirs. At the end of the decade, during the 1999–2000 season of *Dawson’s Creek*, the two major characters, Dawson and Joey, remained virgins as they approached their senior year in high school (Jacobs & Shaw, 1999). One research group notes that this is the one encouraging sign in all of the recent content analyses of mainstream television—that shows popular with teens may be more willing to address risks and responsibilities of early sex (Eyal et al., 2007). However, the actual percentage of such shows still remains surprisingly low: 14% of any shows with sexual content in 2005, but 23% of shows where teens talk about or engage in sex (see Figure 6.6) (Kunkel et al., 2005).

Sex on television is much more than sexual intercourse or sexual intimacy, however. Children and adolescents also can learn a great deal about sex roles: What does it mean to be a man or a woman? What makes someone “cool”? Attractive? Successful? How should one behave around the opposite sex (Signorielli, 2001; Steele, 1999; Strasburger, 2005)? Mainstream television is not kind to adolescent girls, for example (Pipher, 1997). A report from the National Organization for Women (NOW) found great disparities in the quality of programming for adolescent and adult women on the major networks (see Table 6.5) (Gorman, 2000). Super Bowl ads are also notorious for their questionable depiction of women (e.g., Anheuser-Busch ads showing a three-armed man grabbing a woman’s rear, or two men ogling women’s crotches in a yoga class) (Bennett, 2003).
In 1976, the NBC Standards and Practices Department (the network censors) refused to let writer Dan Wakefield use the word responsible when James at 15 and his girlfriend were about to have sexual intercourse for the first time and wanted to discuss birth control (Wakefield, 1987). To date, the networks still reject most public service announcements (PSAs) and advertisements about contraception, fearing that they would offend some unknown population (Strasburger, 2005). If an occasional ad for a birth control product does make it to the air, it is because of the noncontraceptive properties of the product (e.g., Ortho Tri-Cyclen is usually advertised as a treatment for acne, not a means of preventing pregnancy) (see Figure 6.7). Public service announcements that mention condoms—for example, ABC’s 1994 campaign titled “America Responds to AIDS”—are largely confined to late-night TV (Painter, 1994).

Sex (the commercial networks seem to be telling us) is good for selling everything from shampoo, office machinery, hotel rooms, and beer to prime-time series and made-for-TV movies (see Figure 6.8), but a product that would prevent the tragedy of teenage pregnancy—condoms—must never darken America’s

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**Figure 6.6** Percentage of Shows With References to Sexual Risks or Responsibilities, Over Time, of Sexual Content

SOURCE: Kaiser and Dale Kunkel, PhD, at University of Arizona.

NOTE: Programs that depict teen characters in sexual situations are more likely to include references to the risks and responsibilities of sexual intercourse.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading the Networks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NBC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FOX</td>
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### Best Shows: Top 10
1. *Family Law* (CBS)
2. *Chicago Hope* (CBS)
3. *Once & Again* (ABC)
4. *ER* (NBC)
5. *Sabrina the Teenage Witch* (ABC, WB)
6. *20/20* (ABC)
7. *Providence* (NBC)
8. *Becker* (CBS)
9. *Touched by an Angel* (CBS)
10. *Friends* (NBC)

### Thumbs Down to
1. *Perfect Murder, Perfect Town* (made-for-TV movie about JonBenet Ramsey) (CBS)
2. *Getting Away With Murder* (another Ramsey movie) (FOX)
3. *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire* (FOX)
4. *Norm* (ABC)
5. *The Drew Carey Show* (ABC)
6. *Spin City* (ABC)
8. *Walker, Texas Ranger* (CBS)
9. *Nash Bridges* (CBS)

**SOURCE:** Adapted from Gorman (2000).

**NOTE:** Eighty-one shows were analyzed during February 2000 “sweeps” weeks using four criteria: depiction of violence, gender composition and stereotypes, level of sexual exploitation, and social responsibility.
television screens (Strasburger, 2005). Other media have become increasingly sexually explicit as well, particularly in the past two decades, without much regard for discussing either contraception or sexually transmitted disease. At the same time, a certain “raunchiness” has crept into mainstream American media, with four-letter words even heard on prime-time television (Rice, 2000) and celebrity role models such as Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and Lindsay Lohan engaging in increasingly outrageous and provocative behavior (Deveny & Kelley, 2007). Only AIDS has begun to threaten the conspiracy of silence about the health consequences of
sexual activity and to free up the flow of useful and factual information to teenagers, who need it the most.

Why and how has this paradox occurred, and what effect does it have on teenage sexual activity? As with violence, the rate of sexual activity among young people has increased dramatically in the past two decades, although it has leveled off most recently (see Figure 6.9) (CDC, 2000; Strasburger et al., 2006). At the same time, the amount of sexual suggestiveness in the media has increased dramatically as well (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Strasburger, 2005). Although the data are not quite as convincing as with media violence, a handful of studies show that media sex still warrants considerable concern.
Television as a Source of Sexual Information

In any given society, at any given moment in history, people become sexual the same way they become anything else. Without much reflection, they pick up directions from their social environment. They acquire and assemble meanings, skills, and values from the people around them. Critical choices are often made by going along and drifting. People learn when they are quite young the few things they are expected to be, and continue slowly to accumulate a belief in who they are and ought to be throughout the rest of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

—John Gagnon, social science researcher (Roberts, 1983, p. 9)

Content analyses can determine what is being shown on television, but they do not reveal what teenagers actually learn from these portrayals. Apart from its pervasiveness, accessibility, and content, television is an effective sex educator for many reasons. Alternative sex educators, such as parents, may supply only restricted or biased information (Pearl, Bouthilet, & Lazar, 1982). Parents rarely discuss sexual activity or birth control, making a majority of teenagers dissatisfied with parents' educational attempts (Strasburger, 2005). In a 2004 national survey of 519 teens, ages 15 to 19, the media far outranked parents or schools as a source of information about birth control, for example (Kaiser Family Foundation/Seventeen...
Sex education programs in school may also have a limited impact on adolescents: Only 10% to 30% of schools offer comprehensive, high-quality programs; gains in knowledge may be small; and many curricula begin after teenagers have already begun having intercourse (Kirby, 2002, 2007; Landry, Kaeser, & Richards, 1999). The latest survey of sex education programs around the country found that 10% of schools do not teach any sex ed, 30% are abstinence-only programs, 47% are “abstinence-plus” (meaning that birth control can at least be mentioned but abstinence is stressed), and only 20% are comprehensive (National Public Radio, 2004). Yet two national polls of adults seem to indicate that parents are not in favor of abstinence-only sex ed. In 2000, a nationwide poll of adults found that 93% support sex education in high schools and 84% support it in middle schools, including contraception information as well as abstinence (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States [SIECUS], 2000). And more recently, a national survey of more than 1,000 adults found that 82% favor teaching teenagers about both, while 40% oppose abstinence-only sex ed. More than two thirds supported teaching teens how to use condoms properly (Bleakley, Hennessy, & Fishbein, 2006). Similarly, a recent survey of more than 1,300 parents in North Carolina found that 89% support comprehensive sex education (Ito et al., 2006). Although some people feel that abstinence only has been the key factor in the decline in U.S. teen pregnancy rates in the past decade, new research has found that better use of contraception was responsible for 86% of the decline, while abstinence contributed only 14% (Santelli, Lindberg, Finer, & Singh, 2007).

Peers, too, may play a limited role in sex education—not that their counsel is infrequently sought but because the information offered may be incomplete, misleading, distorted, and transmitted by means of jokes or boasting (and may, in fact, be influenced by the media as well) (Coles & Stokes, 1985). Two authors have hypothesized that the media may function as a “super-peer,” in terms of pressuring teens into having sex earlier than expected (J. D. Brown, Halpern, & L’Engle, 2005; Strasburger, 2006a). Teenagers already overestimate the number of their peers who are engaging in sexual intercourse (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, 2004). Several studies document that teens who are avid consumers of media are more likely to overestimate the number of their peers and friends who are sexually active and to feel more pressure from the media to begin having sex than from friends (J. D. Brown & Newcomer, 1991; Kaiser Family Foundation/Children Now, 1999; M. E. Tucker, 2000). For example, in one survey, teenagers reported that TV was equally or more encouraging about sex than either their best male or female friends (J. D. Brown & Newcomer, 1991). In an anonymous survey of 1,015 Seventeen readers, ages 13 to 19, three fourths believed that most teenagers are having sex, whereas only about half actually are (M. E. Tucker, 2000). A survey of 2,100 teenage girls found that only 11-year-olds say that they do not feel pressure from the media to have sex (Haag, 1999). Early maturing girls are more likely to seek out sexual content in a variety of different media and to interpret that content as approving of teens having sex (J. D. Brown et al., 2005). Fans of music videos tend to overestimate the prevalence of sexual behaviors in the real world (Strouse, Goodwin, & Roscoe, 1994). And, finally, in one study of 314 students ages 18 to 20,
greater exposure to sexual content on TV led to higher expectations of the sexuality activity of one's peers and a more positive attitude toward recreational sex (Ward, Gorvine, & Cytron, 2002; Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999). Heavy doses of television may accentuate teens' feelings that everyone is “doing it” except them and may be contributing to the steadily decreasing age at first intercourse for both males and females that has been occurring during the past two decades (Strasburger et al., 2006).

When teenagers or adults are asked about the influence of television, they acknowledge its role as an important source of sexual information but are equally quick to point out that the media have no influence on their behavior. This is the well-known third-person phenomenon (Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999): Everyone is influenced by media except oneself, and it seems particularly prevalent among teenagers. For teens, the very idea that something as simplistic and ordinary as the media could influence them is insulting; they are far more “sophisticated” than that. Yet in at least one national survey, media ranked close to first as a source of adolescents’ sexual information (see Figure 6.10) (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1996). In another study, one in five teens said that they learned the most about sex from the media (J. D. Brown & Steele, 1995).

Many older studies found media ranked highly as well (L. Harris & Associates, 1986, 1987; Pearl et al., 1982; Thornburg, 1981). A 1987 Harris Report, which surveyed 1,250 adults nationwide, found that more than 80% of adults felt that TV was a major influence on teenagers' values and behavior (see Table 6.6) (L. Harris & Associates, 1987). Again, when one hypothesizes that friends and even parents may...
all be greatly influenced themselves by television, the cumulative effects of television may outweigh all other influences. At the same time, there seems to be a disassociation between the concerns of the general public and those in power in Hollywood (see Table 6.7) (Impoco, 1996). If anything, American parents seem

Table 6.6  Television and Birth Control \( (N = 1,250 \text{ Adults}) \) (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should characters on TV shows be shown using birth control?</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is contraception too controversial to be mentioned on TV shows?</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you in favor of advertising birth control on TV?</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would birth control advertising encourage teens to use contraceptives?</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>encourage teenagers to have sex?</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 6.7  Concerns About Sex: Hollywood Versus the American Public (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>American Public</th>
<th>Hollywood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage who feel that TV and movies contribute to these problems</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extramarital sex</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Casual sex</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teens having sex</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence against women</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage who are concerned about the following</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal references to sex</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nudity or seminudity</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premarital sex</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

more concerned about media sex than about media violence, which is the exact opposite of parents in other Western countries.

Not only are the media important generic sources of information, but particular topics may also be far more intensively discussed in the media than elsewhere (L. Harris & Associates, 1988). For instance, television may be the “medium of choice” for dissemination of information about AIDS (Goldberg, 1987). Of nearly 2,000 adults surveyed in a 1988 Roper poll, 96% said they had heard a report on AIDS in the past 3 months on TV, and 73% thought that TV was doing an effective job of educating the public (D. Jones, 1988). Media might also step in when others (i.e., schools) do not provide comprehensive information: A 1996 survey of 719 students and 13 school board members nationwide found that 93% of the students said that schools should teach about birth control and sexually transmitted diseases but that teachers are “scared” to discuss sex in the classroom (USA Today, July 3, 1996, p. 7D). A Kaiser study of 313 school principals nationwide found that more than half of students are not being taught how to use condoms in sex education programs (see Figure 6.11) (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1999). Yet adults increasingly want children educated about condoms. A poll by the CDC found that 86% of adults surveyed supported the airing of information about HIV and AIDS prevention, and 73% favored condoms being discussed on TV (CDC, 1994).

![Figure 6.11](image-url) Percentage of Public Secondary School Principals Reporting Each Is Included in Their Schools’ Sex Education

What Do Children and Teenagers Learn From Television?

Many studies have documented television's ability to transmit information and to shape attitudes (Sutton, Brown, Wilson, & Klein, 2002). Television influences viewers' perception of social behavior and social reality (Bandura, 1977; Shrum, 2002), contributes to cultural norms (Gerbner, 1985; Greenberg, 1982), and conveys messages concerning the behaviors it portrays (Bandura, 1977; Roberts, 1982). Television may offer teenagers "scripts" for sexual behavior that they might not be able to observe anywhere else (Gagnon & Simon, 1987; Kim et al., 2007; Kunkel et al., 1999). In one experiment, exposing teens to programming with a lot of sexual content led them to rate casual sex less negatively than teens who did not view the programs (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994). In other studies, adolescents who view a lot of media are more likely to accept stereotypical sex roles (Walsh-Childers & Brown, 1993) and to believe that the unusual sexual behavior presented on talk shows is realistic (Greenberg & Smith, 2002; Strasburger & Furno-Lamude, 1997). One national survey actually found that 40% of teenagers said they have learned ideas about how to talk with their boyfriends or girlfriends about sex directly from media portrayals (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1998).

Given that the media are filled with sexual talk, behavior, and innuendoes and a lot of inaccurate information (Strasburger, 2005; Sutton et al., 2002), how do children and adolescents interpret such content? Does sexual content have the same impact on a 7-year-old as on a 17-year-old? Clearly, the answer is no. The available research concludes the following:

- Young people bring their own unique knowledge and expectations to the viewing arena (Greenberg, Linsangan, & Soderman, 1993; Truglio, 1992).

- Although young children sometimes understand the jokes and innuendoes about sex (Kaiser Family Foundation/Children Now, 1996), there is usually an age-dependent ability to interpret sexual content (Silverman-Watkins & Sprafkin, 1983).

- Interest paid to and comprehension of sexual content is probably age dependent, although the lower age limits could be decreasing. One recent study of 8- to 13-year-olds found that most of them understood the sexual messages being portrayed and tuned in because they wanted to learn something about sex (Kunkel et al., 1996).

- Sexual content is very appealing to teenagers (J. D. Brown et al., 2006; Sutton et al., 2002). Gender differences also seem to exist. Teen girls prefer more sexual content on television but often watch with their parents (Greenberg & Linsangan, 1993), whereas older adolescent boys choose more unsupervised hard-core sexual content in music lyrics and X-rated films (Buerkel-Rothfuss, Strouse, Petey, & Shatzer, 1993; Greenberg & Linsangan, 1993). Girls who have not yet begun menstruating are much less interested in sexual content; conversely, girls who are more
mature and more interested in sex seem to seek out sexual content in the media (J. D. Brown, White, & Nikopoulou, 1993).

- Many discussions about sex roles occur on television, with many focusing on the male sexual role and emphasizing a “recreational” orientation toward sex. In particular, the most frequently occurring messages depict sexual relations as a competition in which men comment on women’s physical appearance and masculinity is equated with being sexual (Strasburger, 2006b; Ward, 1995).

- Viewing soap operas, which are extremely appealing to many teens, may give viewers unrealistic and unhealthy notions about single motherhood (Larson, 1996). However, not all teenagers apparently interpret the same content in the same way (Greenberg, 1993). In a study of teenagers’ reactions to Madonna’s video “Papa Don’t Preach,” J. D. Brown and Schulze (1990) found that Black teens viewed the popular music video as a father-daughter story, rather than a story about teen pregnancy (see Table 6.8). Studying individual differences among children and teens who view the same media may represent the current “cutting edge” of media research.

Studies show that subtler aspects of human sexuality may also be affected (Donnerstein & Smith, 2001; Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; Levin & Kilbourne, 2008; Signorielli, 2001). As the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) report concluded, the single most significant aspect of a child’s learning about sex is the set of messages that relates to “normal” male and female characteristics and roles in life (Roberts, 1982). Although television has made some progress in this area—for instance, males outnumber females 2:1 currently instead of 3:1 in the 1970s (Gerbner, 1993)—even the independent women shown in current programming frequently depend on men for advice and directions, lose control more often than men, and become more emotionally involved. This has led one critic to charge that the traditional female roles are merely being “dished up in new guises” (Canzonieri, 1984).

Table 6.8 Teenagers’ Versus Adults’ Perceptions of Sex on Television (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes, TV gives a realistic picture about the following:</th>
<th>Teenagers (n = 1,000)</th>
<th>Adults (n = 1,253)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexually transmitted diseases</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pregnancy</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth control</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People making love</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Adapted from Harris and Associates (1986).
Why Teenagers May Be Particularly Susceptible to Sexual Content in the Media

It is well known that teenagers sometimes seek to resemble actors and actresses as they experiment with different facets of their newly forming identities and try on different social “masks.” In particular, the idiosyncrasies of adolescent psychology seem to combine to conspire against successful use of contraception during early and middle adolescence (Strasburger et al., 2006). Teenagers often see themselves egocentrically as being actors in their own “personal fable” (Elkind, 1993) in which the normal rules (e.g., having unprotected sexual intercourse may lead to pregnancy) are suspended—exactly as on television. Even though 70% of teenagers, by age 16, have reached the final level of cognitive operational thinking described by Piaget (1972)—sequential logical thinking (formal operations)—they may still suffer from what Elkind (1984) calls “pseudostupidity”: “The capacity to conceive many different alternatives is not immediately coupled with the ability to assign priorities and to decide which choice is more or less appropriate than others” (p. 384).

One major conclusion of the 1985 Guttmacher Report, which found that the United States had the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in 37 developed countries (despite the fact that American teenagers were no more sexually active than French or Canadian or Belgian teens), concerned the media (E. F. Jones et al., 1985). There are only two possible hypotheses to explain these data: Either American female teens are extremely fertile, or American teens do not use birth control as effectively as teens in other countries. In fact, these data confirm that American society limits access to birth control for teenagers in three vital ways—via their physicians (who are reluctant to prescribe it), their media (which are reluctant to mention it), and their school-based sex education programs (which are reluctant to talk about it) (Strasburger, 2005). Although rates of teen sex have decreased slightly in the 1990s and early 2000s (CDC, 2006), the United States continues to have the highest teen pregnancy rate in the Western world (Abma, Martinez, Mosher, & Dawson, 2004).

Given the content of current American television, one would expect that heavy viewers would believe that premarital sex, extramarital sex, rape, and prostitution are all more common than they really are (Greenberg & Smith, 2002; Strasburger & Furno-Lamude, 1997). Although teenagers are probably not as susceptible as young children to media violence, they may be more susceptible to sexual content (Chia, 2006; Martino, Collins, Kanouse, Elliott, & Berry, 2005). Indeed, even teens may believe that what they watch on television is real (L. Harris & Associates, 1986). This belief is actually highest among those who are heavier consumers of TV and among adolescent populations with the highest teenage pregnancy rates (see Table 6.8) (L. Harris & Associates, 1986). Regular exposure to sexy TV might alter teenagers’ self-perceptions as well. They might be less satisfied with their own sex lives or have higher expectations of their prospective partners (Chia, 2006; Greenberg, 1994; Martino et al., 2005).

If, as Gerbner states, “daytime serials comprise the most prolific single source of medical advice in America” (Gerbner, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1982, p. 295), then teenagers, particularly females, are getting bad advice. One of the main messages
from the soaps is that adults do not use contraception and, in fact, do not plan for
sex at all. Being “swept away” is the natural way to have sex (Wattleton, 1987).
Unfortunately, this message dovetails with adolescents’ own ambivalence about sex
and helps to explain why the leading reasons sexually active teens give for not using
contraception are that sex “just happens” and there was “no time to prepare”
(Strasburger et al., 2006).

Several studies support these manifestations of the “cultivation hypothesis”
(Strasburger, 2005). When college students were asked to identify models of
responsible and irresponsible sexual behavior, they selected primarily media figures
(Fabes & Strouse, 1984). And those who selected media figures as models of sexual
responsibility had more permissive sexual attitudes and higher rates of sexual activ-
ity themselves (Fabes & Strouse, 1987). College students who were heavy viewers of
soap operas estimated higher percentages of people in the real world who are
divorced or have illegitimate children than did light viewers (Buerkel-Rothfuss &
Mayes, 1981; Carveth & Alexander, 1985). In one study, pregnant teenagers were
twice as likely to think that TV relationships are like real-life relationships than
nonpregnant teenagers and that TV characters would not use contraception if
involved in a sexual relationship (Corder-Bolz, 1981). And adolescents who iden-
tify closely with TV personalities and think that their TV role models are more pro-
ficient at sex than they are, or who think that TV sexual portrayals are accurate,
report being less satisfied with their status as sexual virgins and with their own
intercourse experiences (Baran, 1976a, 1976b; Courtright & Baran, 1980).
Exposure to sexually explicit material online may also cultivate recreational atti-
dudes toward sex among males (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006).

Movies

As a medium, movies are probably less significant than television because they
command much less time from the average teenager and are usually viewed with
friends, thus allowing the process of socialization to temper whatever potential
effects may exist. If teenagers see two movies per week at their local cinema, that
still represents only 10% to 15% of the time they spend watching television in an
average week. This does not imply that movies are not important, however (Steele,
2002). As many as 80% of all movies later shown on network or cable TV contain
sexual content (Kunkel et al., 1999), and that content may be considerably more
explicit in the initial theatrical release. There has also been a consistent trend
toward more sexually suggestive and sexually graphic material being presented in
movies (Escobar-Chaves et al., 2005; Greenberg et al., 1987; Nashawaty, 1999). At
the same time, there is a considerable gender imbalance in G-rated films: Female
characters are outnumbered 3:1 by male characters (J. Kelly & Smith, 2006). The
widespread prevalence of VCR and DVD players—85% of American households
have one (Nielsen Media Research, 2000)—also makes the local video shop an
important consideration along with the local cinema.

In a survey of 15- to 16-year-olds in three Michigan cities, more than half had
seen the majority of the most popular R-rated movies between 1982 and 1984,
either in movie houses or on videocassette (Greenberg et al., 1986). Compared with prime-time television, these movies have a frequency of sexual acts or references that is seven times higher, with a much framer depiction than on television (Greenberg, Siemicki, Dorfman, Heeter, & Stanley, 1993). Moreover, for a society concerned with abstinence, it seems curious that there was an average of eight acts of sexual intercourse between unmarried partners per R-rated film analyzed, or nearly half of all the sexual activity depicted. The ratio of unmarried to married intercourse was 32:1 (Greenberg, Siemicki, et al., 1993).

As Greenberg (1994) notes, “What television suggests, movies and videos do” (p. 180). Content analyses of the most popular movies of 1959, 1969, and 1979 demonstrate the trend toward increasing explicitness in depictions of sexual themes, but the themes themselves have remained stable: Sex is for the young and is an “action activity” rather than a means of expressing affection (Abramson & Mechanic, 1983). And, as on TV, intercourse and contraception are distant cousins, at best.

The years 1970 through 1989 represented the era of teenage “sexploitation” films. Hollywood pandered to the adolescent population, presumably because of demographic considerations: Teenagers constitute the largest moviegoing segment of the population. Such movies as Porky’s I, II, and III, The Last American Virgin, Going All the Way, The First Time, Endless Love, Risky Business, Bachelor Party, and Fast Times at Ridgemont High have dealt with teenage sex. Although parents may complain about their teenagers’ interest in such films, it is the adults making films in Hollywood (and the adult movie house operators allowing underage teenagers in to see R-rated films) who are ultimately responsible.

With the baby boom generation and Generation Y having come of age and produced children and grandchildren of their own, Hollywood seems to have returned to targeting the teen audience. In 1999, American Pie updated Porky’s for the next generation. In it, four male high school seniors all make a pact to lose their virginity by prom night. Early in the movie, the main character, Jim (Jason Biggs), masturbates with an apple pie after his friends tell him that that’s what intercourse feels like. The movie also features a scene of stripping and attempted intercourse, broadcast over the Internet (D’Angelo, 1999). Talk about contraception, or the risks of intercourse, is virtually nonexistent, yet the movie still struggled to get an R rating, rather than an NC-17, primarily because of the scene the movie derives its title from (Nashawaty, 1999). As one movie critic notes, the film is “pitched to the first generation of male and female adolescents who have been taught, from birth (mostly by MTV), to act as sex objects for each other” (Glieberman, 1999, p. 43). Two more American Pie sequels exist. One review cites American Pie 2 as being about “breasts, genitalia, ‘potential’ lesbianism, blue silicone sex toys, crude methods of seduction, ‘the rule of three’ (just watch the movie), a shower of ‘champagne,’ phone sex, tantric sex, and oh yeah... superglue” (“Editorial Reviews,” 2006). Other researchers feel that the distorted view of romance in contemporary movies popular with teens is at least as problematic as the overt sex (Pardun, 2002). Or that frank portrayals of adolescent sexuality are incredibly rare (C. Kelly, 2005). Even Juno is unrealistic (Goodman, 2008).
Nevertheless, since the 1980s, virtually every R-rated teen movie has contained at least one nude scene, and some, such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High* and *Porky’s*, contain up to 15 instances of sexual intercourse (Greenberg, Siemicki, et al., 1993). As one expert notes,

The typical hour-long television program...will provide between two and three intimate sex acts, and most likely, there will be discussions/conversations about what someone is doing or has done, with the visual components quite rare. The typical 90 minute R-rated film, on the other hand, yields seven times that amount of sexual activity, with a large proportion made manifest through visual images. (Greenberg, Siemicki, et al., 1993, p. 56)

### Questionable Language and Taste in Movies and Television: A New Trend?

Increasingly during the late 1990s and into the new millennium, Hollywood seems to be trying to stretch the boundaries of both the ratings and good taste. What is acceptable to the networks and the studios changes all the time, but during the past decade, the entertainment industry has seemed less inclined to fear moral watchdogs in society (see Table 6.9). A study of foul language on prime-time TV between 1998 and 2002 found an increase of nearly 95% during the so-called “Family Hour” and 109% during the 9 p.m. ET/PT timeslot (Parents Television Council, 2004). In addition, other studies have found that there is now one word of profanity uttered every 8 minutes on TV, with FOX-TV being the worst offender (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004b). Shows rated TVPG actually have more questionable language than shows rated TV14. Similarly, more offensive language is found on shows that do not contain an “L” rating for “language” (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004b)! Currently, George Carlin’s “seven dirty words,” which were once banned from broadcast media, are now heard once every 3 hours on TV (Kaye & Sapolsky, 2004a). In 2006, Congress passed legislation that increased the fines for broadcasting indecency from $32,500 to $325,000 per incident. The problem is how to define *indecency* (see Exercises) (Marcus, 2006). In addition, while broadcast TV standards may have tightened somewhat since the Super Bowl incident, cable TV continues to “push the envelope” with increasing amounts of bad language and nudity (Daly, 2005). To date, Congress has allowed the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to have absolutely no oversight of the cable industry.

In Hollywood films, *There’s Something About Mary; South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut; Austin Powers: The Spy Who Shagged Me; Bad Santa; Kill Bill;* and *Freddy Got Fingered* have set new standards for what can be said, shown, or discussed on screen (see Exercises for a discussion of “taste”). For example, *Freddy Got Fingered* features scenes of the star masturbating a live horse and prancing around in the skin of a gutted deer and a costar being sprayed with elephant ejaculate (Robischon, 2001). Minute for minute, *South Park* may be the crudest movie ever distributed, with 399 words that the Movie Index of Colorado Springs classified as “crude, obscene/profane or sexually suggestive” (Farhi, 1999). (Although *Pulp Fiction*
contained 411 such words, it ran 154 minutes in length, compared with South Park’s 80 minutes. (Adult films such as Spike Lee’s Summer of Sam and Stanley Kubrick’s Eyes Wide Shut somehow avoided the “kiss-of-death” NC-17 rating and received R ratings instead. Even PG-13 films such as Wild Wild West contain conversations about penis size and breast texture and sights of Salma Hayek’s bare buttocks (Hershenson, 1999). Of course, any hour spent watching HBO’s series, The Sopranos, is likely to expose a child or teenager to words that cannot even be printed in a college textbook.

One media critic feels that this has all contributed to a new “culture of disrespect” among children and adolescents, who are susceptible to the role-modeling influence of such programming (Walsh & Bennett, 2005). Another prominent critic, commenting on the summer of 2000 that produced Me, Myself & Irene and Road Trip, commented, “The stinky-poo outrages of recent Hollywood fare have no higher agenda than coaxing rowdy laughter from randy teenagers. . . . Crass is mass market” (Ansen, 2000, p. 61). To date, no research examines the impact of “raunchy” content or language on children or adolescents.

Print Media

Contemporary magazines reflect the same trend as seen in television and movies—a shift away from naive or innocent romantic love in the 1950s and 1960s to increasingly clinical concerns about sexual functioning (Planned Parenthood,
Content analyses demonstrate that by the 1970s, such mainstream magazines as *Ladies’ Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, McCall’s,* and *Time* contained a threefold increase in the number of articles that discussed sexual functioning and a sixfold increase in sexual terms used (Herold & Foster, 1975; Scott, 1986). Accompanying this change was a shift from a discussion of sexual “morality” to a concern about sexual “quality,” a skepticism about virginity at marriage, and a liberalized view of extramarital sex (Silverman-Watkins, 1983).

In one of the handful of studies of print media that adolescents read, Klein et al. (1993) found that *Seventeen, Sports Illustrated, Teen, Time, Ebony, Young Miss, Jet, Newsweek,* and *Vogue* accounted for more than half of all reported reading. Adolescents who read sports or music magazines were more likely to report engaging in risky behaviors. Many teenagers, especially girls, report that they rely on magazines as an important source of information about sex, birth control, and health-related issues (Kaiser Family Foundation, 1996; Treise & Gotthoffer, 2001; Wray & Steele, 2002). A 2004 content analysis of British magazines for teens found that girls’ magazines tend to focus on romance, emotions, and female responsibility for contraception, whereas boys’ magazines were more visually suggestive and assumed that all males were heterosexual (Batchelor, Kitzinger, & Burtney, 2004).

Content analyses of *Seventeen* and *Sassy* have found that most of the stories in these two popular magazines contained very traditional socialization messages, including that girls depend on someone else to solve one’s personal problems (Peirce, 1993), girls are obsessed with guys, girls are heterosexual, and girls are always appearance-conscious shoppers (Wray & Steele, 2002). *Sassy* initially featured content such as “Losing Your Virginity,” “Getting Turned On,” and “My Girlfriend Got Pregnant” (J. D. Brown & Steele, 1995). After an advertising boycott organized by the religious right, however, such content was withdrawn. *Sassy* is also no longer in print.

Kilbourne (1999) points out the trivialization of sex that occurs in women’s magazines, both in their content and their advertising. For example, one print ad for jeans says, “You can learn more about anatomy after school,” and shows a teenage guy groping a girl. According to Kilbourne, the print media give adolescent girls impossibly contradictory messages: be innocent, but be sexually experienced too. Teen magazines such as *Jane* are filled with articles such as “How Smart Girls Flirt,” “Sex to Write Home About,” “15 Ways Sex Makes You Prettier,” and “Are You Good in Bed?” (Kilbourne, 1999).

In their defense, however, the print media are also far more likely to discuss contraception and advertise birth control products than broadcast media are (Walsh-Childers et al., 2002). A content analysis of teen magazines found that they devote an average of 2½ pages per issue to sexual issues (Walsh-Childers, 1997). Of sexual articles in teen magazines, nearly half (42%) concerned health issues (Walsh-Childers, 1997). In fact, the October 2005 issue of *Seventeen* featured a very frank, 2-page discussion of gynecological health, titled “Vagina 101,” which won a Maggie Award from the Planned Parenthood Federation of America (Planned Parenthood, 2006). However, in general, much of the health coverage in teen magazines is in the form of advice columns, and the overarching focus seems
to be on decision making about when to lose one’s virginity (Huston et al., 1998; Walsh-Childers, 1997). To date, only one study has examined the possible link between sexual content in magazines and sexual attitudes and behaviors: Brown’s sexual media diet included teen magazines and found that sexy media of all types decrease the age at first intercourse by approximately a year (J. D. Brown et al., 2006).

The Nature of the Research

Unlike the violence research, studies of the impact of sexy television and movies are, by necessity, considerably scarcer and more limited. Researchers cannot simply show a group of 13-year-olds several X-rated movies and then measure the attitudinal or behavioral changes that result. But a number of research modalities have yielded important data.

Content Analyses. Content analyses simply assay the amount of sexual material in current programming, lyrics, and articles without addressing its effects. From 1975 to 1988, the number of sexual behaviors on prime-time television doubled, the amount of suggestiveness increased more than fourfold, and sexual intercourse was portrayed for the first time (L. Harris & Associates, 1988). In the 1990s, mainstream television programming became even more explicit in its depiction of sexual content (see Tables 6.10 and 6.11) (Huston et al., 1998). Yet the unhealthy trends established in the 1980s also continued, with more TV sex occurring between unmarried adults than married adults and with only rare mentions of the risks of unprotected sex and teen sex (Kunkel et al., 1996). More recently, Cope-Farrar and Kunkel (2002) performed the most comprehensive analysis, examining the top 15 shows for teens ages 12 to 17 according to the Nielsen ratings (see Tables 6.1–6.3). More than 80% contained talk about sex or sexual behavior. Situation comedies featured 7 scenes per hour with sexual content, and shows with sexual material averaged 11 scenes per hour. Interestingly, for the first time in any content analysis, there was actually more sexual behavior depicted than talk about sex. All of these trends have continued into the early 2000s. Programming remains highly sexualized, according to the biennial content analyses now done at the University of Arizona (Kunkel, Cope-Farrar, Biely, Farinola, & Donnerstein, 2001; Kunkel et al., 2003, 2005) (see also Figure 6.3A–D and Figure 6.6):

- More than 75% of all prime-time shows now contain sexual content.
- Popular teen shows contain more sexual content than other, adult, prime-time shows.
- Of the most popular shows with teens, nearly half (45%) include sexual behavior.
- One of every 10 shows includes a portrayal of sexual intercourse or implied intercourse.
• Overall, only 14% of shows with sexual content mention any of the risks or responsibilities that go with having sex. This figure is only 10% for the top 20 teen shows. Even when risks are mentioned, they are usually inconsequential. Only 1% of all of the shows with sexual content have risks or responsibilities as the primary theme.

• Since these content analyses were first done in 1998, the total number of sexual scenes has nearly doubled. A total of nearly 5,000 TV programs have been analyzed in the four content analyses done to date.

Table 6.10  Major Issues on TV Talk Shows (N = 120 Shows) (in Percentages)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>% of Shows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent-child relations</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dating</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital relationship</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual activity</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal acts</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual infidelity</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrities</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: Data from Greenberg et al. (1995).

Table 6.11  Sexual Content of Soap Operas (1996)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviors</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Average per Hour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passionate kissing</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>1.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal discussions about intercourse</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>0.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Petting/caressing</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prostitution</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual depictions of intercourse</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussions of “safe sex,” contraception, or AIDS</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Finally, several new studies have investigated other aspects of media in the new millennium:

- A unique content analysis of the 2001–2003 seasons found that about 15% of sexual content in programming features nonheterosexuals (Fisher, Hill, Grube, & Gruber, 2007). Another, more recent study of the 679 series characters in the 2006–2007 season found that only 1.3% of the characters are gay, lesbian, or bisexual (Moore, 2006).
- Sexual consequences in teen programming were the subject of another content analysis, examining prime-time dramas that feature characters 12 to 22 years old. The author found that the “double standard” is alive and well: Female sexual activity was more likely to have negative consequences than male sexual activity (Aubrey, 2004).

**Soap Operas**

As with prime-time programming, soap operas have become even more sexually oriented and sexually explicit since the 1980s. Two content analyses provide greater understanding of trends in the 1990s (Greenberg & Busselle, 1994; Heintz-Knowles, 1996). Greenberg and Busselle (1994) analyzed 10 episodes of each of the five top-rated soaps (General Hospital, All My Children, One Life to Live, Young and the Restless, and Days of Our Lives) in 1994 and found an average of 6.6 sexual incidents per hour (Greenberg & Busselle, 1994). Sex was visually depicted twice as often as it was talked about. By 1994, nearly half the sexual incidents involved intercourse, usually between unmarried partners. Surprisingly, rape was the second most frequently depicted sexual activity, with a total of 71 incidents or 1.4 per hour. Contraception or “safe sex” was mentioned only 5 times out of 333 sexual incidents. The only mention of AIDS among the 50 episodes concerned the risk associated with intravenous drug use, not sex. And there was a single episode where a parent discussed sex with her teenage daughter. By 1996, sexual behavior was three times more likely to be depicted than merely talked about. Only 10% of sexual episodes involved the use of contraception or discussions about the risks of sexual activity (Table 6.11) (Heintz-Knowles, 1996). But soap opera producers have also been more responsive to national health issues than prime-time producers (Fox, 2001; Stern, Russell, & Russell, 2005). For example, General Hospital (ABC) was the first to feature a character with HIV, who at one point discusses with her partner the need to use condoms if they have intercourse. On Young and the Restless (CBS), a woman decides to get tested for HIV after learning about her husband’s affairs. Internationally, soap operas have been used prosocially to foster healthier attitudes about sex, sexuality, and particularly HIV (Howe, Owen-Smith, & Richardson, 2002; Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005; Weinberg, 2006).

**Reality TV**

Despite its name, reality TV is anything but real—as any communications student, teacher, or parent well knows (Brenton & Cohen, 2003; Hill, 2005;
Murray & Ouellette, 2004). But in the early 2000s, reality TV has become immensely popular. In the Nielsen ratings for June 26 to July 2, 2006, for example, 5 of the top 20 shows were reality shows (“Nielsen Ratings,” 2006). Reality shows can vary from talent shows (American Idol, So You Think You Can Dance, Making the Band) to adventure dramas (Survivor, Amazing Race) to the most common type—sexually oriented shows. These vary from all-out voyeurism (Big Brother, Real World, and Are You Hot?) to dating shows such as The Bachelorette and MTV’s Next and Parental Control. A new BBC reality show, The Baby Borrowers, has parents “donating” their children to teenagers so that they can practice being parents. The announcer opens the show with the statement, “With the highest rate of teen pregnancy in Europe, Britain’s teenagers are breeding like rabbits” (ABC News, 2007). The overriding message of many of the shows is that “you’ve got to be ‘hot’” (Christenson & Ivancin, 2006). To date, only two studies have explored the impact of such shows on adolescents and young adults. A study of 197 young adults found that males and viewers who perceived the shows to be real were more likely to share the attitudes displayed in reality dating shows (Ferris, Smith, Greenberg, & Smith, 2007). And in a study of 334 college students, Zurbriggen and Morgan (2006) found that viewing such programming was correlated with beliefs in a double standard, that men are sex driven, and that men and women are sexual adversaries. But the researchers also found that those students who tended to be less sexually experienced were actually watching more of the reality dating shows, which may signify the importance of such programs in sexual socialization.

Advertisements

From the time of the Noxzema girl, who advised male viewers “to take it off, take it all off,” to Brooke Shields’ “nothing comes between me and my Calvins,” to present-day ads for beer, wine coolers, and perfume, advertising has always used explicit visual imagery to try to make a sale (Kilbourne, 1999). In 1977, one researcher found that nearly one third of all advertisements on prime-time TV “used as selling points the desirability of sex appeal, youth, or beauty, and/or those in which sex appeal (physical attractiveness) of commercial actors or actresses was a selling point” (Tan, 1979, p. 285). A similar study 8 years later of more than 4,000 network commercials found that 1 of every 3.8 ads relied on attractiveness-based imagery (Downs & Harrison, 1985). One by-product of this kind of advertising is that women are subtly taught that their main goal in life is to attract men or serve as sexual prizes. If she is successful, can she possibly say no when he wants sex? And can he actually believe her (J. D. Brown & Steele, 1995)?

One by-product of the feminist movement of the 1970s has been that men are now being increasingly exploited for their sex appeal the way women once were (see Figure 6.12) (Svetkey, 1994). American media have become equal-opportunity exploiters.
Modern advertising often features women’s bodies that have been “dismembered”—just the legs or breasts appear (see Figure 6.13) (Kilbourne, 1999). Increasingly, little girls are sexualized (e.g., a shampoo ad reads, “You’re a Halston woman from the very beginning” and shows a girl of about 5) (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). A study of fashion advertisements in popular magazines found that females are more likely than males to be shown in submissive positions, sexually displayed, or be included in violent imagery (Rudman & Verdi, 1993). As Kilbourne (1999) notes,

> When sexual jokes are used to sell everything from rice to roach-killer, from cars to carpets, it’s hard to remember that sex can unite two souls, can inspire awe. Individually, these ads are harmless enough, sometimes even funny, but the cumulative effect is to degrade and devalue sex. (p. 265)

What impact does this sexualization of American advertising have on adolescents? One can only speculate, but there are data that American adults seem to be having more sexual problems than ever before. In the most recent and comprehensive study since the Kinsey Report of the 1940s, 43% of women and 31% of men reported sexual dysfunction (defined as a lack of interest in or enjoyment of sex, performance anxiety, or inability to achieve orgasm) (Laumann, Paik, & Rosen, 1999). Could it be that media images and ads for erectile dysfunction are shaping people’s reality of what their sex lives should be? If so, this would again represent

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Figure 6.12

SOURCE: ©2008 Jockey International, Inc. All rights reserved; CHIPPENDALES®, THE ULTIMATE GIRLS NIGHT OUT®, and the Cuffs & Collars Trade Dress are registered trademarks owned by Chippendales USA, LLC., and may not be used or reproduced without permission from Chippendales. ©2000–2007 Chippendales USA, LLC. All rights reserved.
the “cultivation effect” at work, which is known to be a strong factor in media influence (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). Is it possible to measure up to the media’s apparent sexual standard, where everyone is having great (harmless) sex all the time? Considerable qualitative research with adolescents will be needed before these questions can be answered authoritatively.

**Correlational Studies.** Clearly, according to many content analyses, American television is both sexy and suggestive. Simple common sense would tell us that this is not healthy for children and younger adolescents. But some people want stronger evidence. Does all of this sexy content actually harm children, or is it merely fantasy and entertainment? Do teenagers who become sexually active at a younger age do so because of exposure to sexy media, or do they simply prefer to watch such programming? Unfortunately, correlational studies are rare. In stark contrast to the media violence literature, only 10 correlational studies exist in which researchers have tried to assess the relationship between early onset of sexual intercourse and amount of sexual content viewed on television, and 4 of the 10 are now more than 10 to 20 years old. However, all did demonstrate measurable effects:

- In a study of 75 adolescent girls, half pregnant and half nonpregnant, the pregnant girls watched more soap operas before becoming pregnant and were less likely to think that their favorite soap characters would use birth control (Corder-Bolz, 1981).

- A study of 391 junior high school students in North Carolina found that those who selectively viewed more sexy TV were more likely to have begun having sexual intercourse in the preceding year (J. D. Brown & Newcomer, 1991).

- A study of 326 Cleveland teenagers showed that those with a preference for MTV had increased amounts of sexual experience in their mid-teen years (R. A. Peterson & Kahn, 1984).
• Data from the National Surveys of Children revealed that males who watch more TV had the highest prevalence of sexual intercourse and that teens who watched TV apart from their family had a rate of intercourse three to six times higher than those who viewed with their family (J. L. Peterson, Moore, & Furstenberg, 1991).

• A study of 214 teens ages 13 to 18 and their families found that there appeared to be no relationship between male virginity and exposure to R-rated or X-rated films, popular music, or music videos (Strouse, Buerkel-Rothfuss, & Long, 1995). However, for females, there was a relationship between exposure to music videos and premarital sex. There was also an association between unsatisfactory home environments and premarital sex.

• A phone survey of 1,010 teens ages 14 to 19 in upstate New York found that listening to pop or hip-hop music or reading women's magazines was associated with having had sexual intercourse. It also found that adolescents spend nearly 8 hours each day with various types of media (Pazos et al., 2001).

• A study of 244 high school students' viewing habits found that viewing more talk shows and sexy prime-time shows was associated with greater sexual stereotyping and with greater levels of sexual experience (Ward & Friedman, 2006).

• An eighth, somewhat flawed study found that African American female teens with greater exposure to rap music videos or X-rated movies are more likely to have had multiple sexual partners and test positive for an STD (Wingood et al., 2001).

• Another recent study of 847 teenagers and their parents found that teens whose parents impose more restrictions on their TV viewing habits are less sexually experienced and have healthier body self-images (Schooler, Kim, & Sorsoli, 2006).

• Finally, a study of more than 1,000 teenagers from 14 middle schools in the Southeast found that exposure to sexual content in the media explained 13% of the variance in intention to have sex in the near future (L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006).

**Longitudinal Studies.** Up until recently, there were no substantial longitudinal studies that could implicate or absolve sexy media content of encouraging early teen sex. But that situation has recently changed with an influx of funding from the NIMH: Now there are three, with more in process. In the first study of its kind, California researchers found that teens who were exposed to sexy media were more likely to begin intercourse at a younger age. Nearly 1,800 teens, ages 12 to 17, were studied initially and then a year later. Exposure to sexy media doubled the risk of their initiating sexual intercourse or advancing significantly in their noncoital activity (Collins et al., 2004). Similar findings were reported using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. In a study of nearly 5,000 teenagers younger than age 16 years who had not yet had sexual intercourse, researchers found that those who watched more than 2 hours of TV per day were nearly twice as likely to begin having sex within a year, compared with lighter viewers.
(Ashby et al., 2006). Finally, the “gold-standard” study was done by J. D. Brown and her colleagues (2006), using a Sexual Media Diet comprising not only TV but movies, music, and print media as well. Exposure to a heavier Sexual Media Diet among one thousand 12- to 14-year-olds in North Carolina accelerated White adolescents’ sexual activity and doubled their risk of early intercourse within 2 years (see Figure 6.14). The study was compelling and comprehensive in every way, except for omitting exposure to online pornography (Strasburger, 2006b). Several more longitudinal studies, funded by NIMH, are currently being conducted.

Experimental Studies. Severe constraints still exist on studying any aspect of childhood or adolescent sexuality (Huston et al., 1998). Even in the new millennium, researchers continue to fight the old shibboleth that if you ask kids about sex, they will get ideas they would not otherwise have had (Strasburger, 2005). Studies have examined the effectiveness of sex in advertising and programming: High schools girls shown 15 “beauty commercials” were more likely to believe that physical attractiveness was important for them than were girls shown neutral commercials (Tan, 1979). Male college students who viewed a single episode of Charlie’s Angels were harsher in their evaluations of the beauty of potential dates than were males who had not seen the episode (Kenrick & Guttieres, 1980),

![Figure 6.14](image-url)

**Figure 6.14** Sexual Media Diet (SMD) and Risk of Early Sexual Intercourse

*SOURCE: From J. D. Brown et al. (2006).*

*NOTE: New research has found a doubled risk of early sexual intercourse with exposure to more sexual content in a variety of different media.*
and male college students shown centerfolds from *Playboy* and *Penthouse* were more likely to find their own girlfriends less sexually attractive (Weaver, Masland, & Zillmann, 1984).

Studies have also examined the impact of sexual content on attitude formation (Greenberg & Hofschire, 2000). For example, college students shown sexually explicit films reported a greater acceptance of sexual infidelity and promiscuity than controls did (Zillmann, 1994), and adolescents viewing only 10 music videos were more likely to agree with the notion that “premarital sex is acceptable” (Greeson & Williams, 1986). In two studies, college students’ disapproval of rape was lessened by exposure to only 9 minutes of scenes taken from television programs and R-rated movies or viewing 5 hours of sexually explicit films over a 6-week period (J. D. Brown, Childers, & Waszak, 1990; Zillmann & Bryant, 1982). Finally, both male and female college students exposed to hour-long nonviolent X-rated videos over a period of 6 weeks reported less satisfaction with their intimate partners (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). The researchers concluded, “Great sexual joy and ecstasy are accessible to parties who just met, who are in no way committed to one another, and who will part shortly, never to meet again” (Zillmann & Bryant, 1988, p. 450)—certainly an ominous finding for those interested in diminishing rates of adolescent sexual intercourse.

Obviously, studying college students is considerably easier than studying younger adolescents, particularly when sexual behavior is the variable being assessed. Although about half of high school seniors have engaged in sexual intercourse (CDC, 2000) and adolescents are bombarded with sexual messages in the media, school administrators and parents are still reluctant to have their teenagers questioned about their sexual activities, even with the use of informed consent (Strasburger, 2006a).

Therefore, aside from the NIMH-funded longitudinal studies discussed above, there is currently a return to small-scale laboratory and field studies, two of which have shown intriguing results. In the first, “massive exposure” to prime-time programming that deals with pre-, extra-, or nonmarital sex desensitized young viewers to such “improprieties.” However, several factors militated against this: a clearly defined value system within the family, an ability to freely discuss important issues within the family, and active, critical viewing skills (Bryant & Rockwell, 1994). In the second, a small study of adolescents’ interpretations of soap operas, Walsh-Childers (1991) found that teenagers’ own sexual “schemas” influenced their perceptions of the characters’ relationships. Interestingly, mention of birth control did not have to be explicit to be effective. In fact, the use of the euphemism *protection* seemed to be preferable.

### Prosocial Sexual Content on Television

One of the most appealing and practical approaches to address public health concerns about television has been dubbed “edutainment”—the practice of embedding socially responsible messages into mainstream programming (J. D. Brown & Strasburger, 2007; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). The Media Project represents a
unique partnership between Advocates for Youth and the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation that works with the television industry in a collaborative fashion to increase the amount of accurate and prosocial sexual content on television. During the 1999 TV season, The Media Project worked with the producers of *Felicity* on a two-part episode about date rape. The Project encouraged the creation of a toll-free rape crisis hotline number to be displayed at the end of the episode, and the hotline received more than 1,000 calls directly after the show aired (Folb, 2000). In a small survey about a later episode that discussed birth control, more than one fourth of 12- to 21-year-olds surveyed felt they had learned something new about birth control and safe sex. The Project has also provided information for a *Jack & Jill* episode about an unwanted pregnancy, for a *For Your Love* episode about condom use, and for a *Get Real* episode about parent-child communication and teens becoming sexually active for the first time (Folb, 2000). In 2002, *Friends* aired an episode about condoms, and 27% of a national sample of teens saw the program. Nearly half the teens watched the episode with an adult, and 10% talked about condom efficiency as a direct result of the episode (Collins, Elliott, Berry, Kanouse, & Hunter, 2003).

Collaborative efforts between the Kaiser Foundation and the producers of the hit show *ER* also resulted in successful storylines about the risks of human papilloma virus and the usefulness of emergency contraception (see Figure 6.15).

![Figure 6.15](image-url)  
**Figure 6.15** Viewers’ Increased Knowledge After Storylines on the Hit Show *ER* About Emergency Contraception and about Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)  
SOURCE: Brodie et al. (2001). Reprinted with permission from the Kaiser Family Foundation.

NOTE: A unique collaboration between the Kaiser Family Foundation and the producers of *ER* resulted in important health information about human papillomavirus (a sexually transmitted disease) and about emergency contraception being written into stories. This study illustrates the importance of mainstream media in disseminating information about sex and sexuality.
In England, a storyline in which one of the characters in the hit show *Coronation Street* died of cervical cancer resulted in a 21% increase in Pap smears in the 19 weeks after the show aired (Howe et al., 2002). The Soap Opera Summit in Hollywood and international efforts to embed storylines into popular soap operas are other examples of prosocial efforts. For example, media giant Viacom and the Kaiser Family Foundation launched an ambitious project in 2003 to produce $120 million worth of public service announcements and print ads concerning HIV/AIDS and to encourage Viacom producers to include storylines in their TV shows that would raise AIDS awareness (Tannen, 2003). Such efforts demonstrate that the entertainment industry can be remarkably receptive to outside input and that healthier content can be introduced into mainstream television without government pressure or the threat of censorship.

The mass media have also been used proactively to try to increase parent-child communication about sex. In North Carolina, a mass media campaign used billboards and radio and TV PSAs with the theme of “Talk to your kids about sex. Everyone else is.” The impact of the campaign was assessed via a postexposure survey to 1,132 parents of adolescents living in the 32 counties covered by the campaign. Exposure to a billboard message or PSA significantly correlated with a parent talking to his or her child about sex during the following month (DuRant, Wolfson, LaFrance, Balkrishnan, & Altman, 2006).

**Contraceptive Advertising**

One of the key findings of the 1985 Guttmacher Report was that America’s high teenage pregnancy rate partially results from inadequate access to birth control. This resulted in important health information about human papillomavirus (a sexually transmitted disease) and about emergency contraception being written into stories. This study illustrates the importance of mainstream media in disseminating information about sex and sexuality (E. F. Jones, Forrest, Henshaw, Silverman, & Torres, 1988). Despite decreases in rates of sexual activity and pregnancy among American teens in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the United States still leads the Western world in teen pregnancy (Abma et al., 2004; CDC, 2006). It seems odd, perhaps even hypocritical, that as the culture has become increasingly “sexualized” in the past 20 years, the one taboo remaining is the public mention of birth control. In 1985, the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology (ACOG) made headlines when its public service announcement about teen pregnancy, titled “I Intend,” was banned from all three major networks. The one offensive line that had to be removed before the networks agreed to run the PSA said, “Unintended pregnancies have risks...greater risks than any of today's contraceptives” (Strasburger, 1989, p. 767). Network executives claim that such PSAs or advertisements for birth control products would offend many viewers.

The situation remains the same now as it did two decades ago. However, birth control ads for nonprescription products air on many local TV stations around the United States (e.g., KABC–Los Angeles) without complaints being registered. In addition, the 1987 Harris Report shows that a majority of the American public—including 62% of the Catholics surveyed—favor birth control advertising on
Figure 6.16

television (see Table 6.6) (L. Harris & Associates, 1987). A more recent study commissioned by the Kaiser Family Foundation (2001) found similar results. Meanwhile, ads for Viagra, Cialis, and Levitra are abundant and make sex seem like a recreational sport (see Figure 6.16). In 2006, $241 million was spent advertising erectile dysfunction (ED) drugs, which helped result in sales of $1.4 billion (Agovino, 2007). The apparent “disconnect” between the networks’ willingness to air ads for ED drugs and their unwillingness to air ads for birth control products seems hypocritical at best (AAP, 2006).

Would advertising of condoms and birth control pills have an impact on the rates of teen pregnancy or acquisition of HIV (see Figure 6.17)? The Guttmacher data (E. F. Jones et al., 1988) and other comparative data (Henshaw, 2004) seem to indicate that the answer is yes for teen pregnancy because European countries have far lower rates of teen pregnancy and far more widespread media discussion and advertising of birth control products. Furthermore, according to Population Services International, when Zaire began advertising condoms, there was a 20-fold increase in the number of condoms sold in just 3 years—from 900,000 in 1988 to 18 million in 1991 (Alter, 1994). In a relevant “natural experiment,” Earvin “Magic” Johnson’s announcement of his HIV infection was associated with a decline in “one-night stands” and sex with multiple partners in the subsequent 14 weeks in a Maryland study (CDC, 1993). It also resulted in increased awareness about AIDS (Kalichman & Hunter, 1992).

Would advertising birth control products make teenagers more sexually active than they already are? There is no evidence available indicating that allowing
freer access to birth control encourages teenagers to become sexually active at a younger age (Farrar, 2006; Mueller, Gavin, & Kulkarni, 2008; Reichelt, 1978; Strasburger et al., 2006). In fact, the data indicate the exact opposite: There are now at least eight peer-reviewed, controlled clinical trials showing that giving teens freer access to condoms does not increase their sexual activity or push virginal teenagers into having sex but does increase the use of condoms among those who are sexually active (Blake et al., 2003; Furstenberg, Geitz, Teitler, & Weiss, 1997; Guttmacher et al., 1997; Jemmott, Jemmott, & Fong, 1998; Kirby et al., 1999; Schuster, Bell, Berry, & Kanouse, 1998; Sellers, McGraw, & McKinlay, 1994; Wolk & Rosenbaum, 1995). Typically, teenage females engage in unprotected intercourse for 6 months to a year before seeking medical attention for birth control (Strasburger et al., 2006). Organizations such as the AAP, the American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, and the Society for Adolescent Medicine have all called for contraceptive advertising on American television (AAP, 2001, 2007; Espey, Cosgrove, & Ogburn, 2007; Society for Adolescent Medicine, 2000). Despite the hopes of many public health officials, the fear of AIDS may not be sufficient to increase teenagers’ use of contraception. In 2006, contraceptive advertising was rarely shown on national network programming (except for occasional ads for the “patch” and ads for Ortho Tri-Cyclen, which mention only improvement in acne, not pregnancy prevention; see Figure 6.7) and very much subject to the discretion of local station managers. And ads for emergency contraception are nowhere to be found, yet every year American women have 3 million unplanned pregnancies, leading to 1.3 million abortions. Advertising emergency contraceptives might be the ideal way to reduce the number of abortions in the United States (Kristof, 2006). Thus, in our opinion, a major potential solution to a significant American health problem is being thwarted by a few very powerful but fearful people (see Figure 6.17).

**Pornography**

The relationship of pornography to behavior remains an important health issue as well as a controversial First Amendment issue (Donnerstein & Linz, 1994; Malamuth & Huppin, 2005). Interestingly, print media are protected constitutionally by the First Amendment, whereas the broadcast media are subject to regulation under the 1934 Federal Communications Commission Charter. To date, cable television remains in a legal netherworld. For obvious reasons, there are no studies on the impact of pornography on children or adolescents.

**Exposure**

Pornography is a big business in the United States—nearly $13 billion a year (Bashir, 2007)—and teenagers have surprisingly ready access to a variety of R-rated and X-rated material. By age 15, 92% of males and 84% of females had seen or read
Playboy or Playgirl in one study; by age 18, virtually all had (D. Brown & Bryant, 1989). Exposure to more hard-core magazines begins at an average age of 13.5 years, and 92% of 13-15-year-olds report having seen an X-rated film (D. Brown & Bryant, 1989). Of 16 popular R-rated films, Greenberg, Siemicki, et al. (1993) found that 53% to 77% of 9th and 10th graders had seen most of them. In a study of 522 African American 14-18-year-olds, researchers found that 30% had seen at least one X-rated movie within the past 3 months (Wingood et al., 2001). Of course, the Internet now looms as the primary source for pornography (see Chapter 11; Kanuga & Rosenfeld, 2004). A 2001 Kaiser Foundation survey documented that 70% of teens have been exposed to pornography online, whether intentionally or unintentionally (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001), although a newer study of 1,500 youth nationwide found that by 2006, that figure had fallen to 42% (Wolak, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2007).

Research

Current research involving adults seems to indicate that pornography itself is harmless unless violence is also involved (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2000). In that situation, aggression might increase because there is a known relationship between portrayals of violence and subsequent aggressive behavior (Cline, 1994; R. J. Harris, 1994a, 1994b; Huston et al., 1992; Linz & Malamuth, 1993; Lyons, Anderson, & Larson, 1994; Malamuth & Huppin, 2005; Weaver, 1994). The term pornography means different things to different people. The current state-of-the-art assessment subdivides the research according to content (Huston et al., 1992; Malamuth & Huppin, 2005; Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2000).

Erotica (R- or X-rated material with implied or actual sexual contact but no violence or coercion). Probably no antisocial effect (Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987). Wingood et al. (2001) did find an association between African American females having viewed X-rated movies and having more negative attitudes toward using condoms, having multiple sex partners, not using contraception, and having a positive test for chlamydia. This was a relatively small study that found an association, not a causal connection. It may represent a cultivation effect or its opposite: that teens who are more interested in sex tend to seek out more sexual media. Only a longitudinal correlational study will enable researchers to distinguish between the two.

X-Rated Material Degrading to Women (nonviolent XXX-rated videos in which women are the eager recipients of any and all male sexual urges). Highly controversial. Most studies find no antisocial effect (Donnerstein et al., 1987). But some researchers suggest that attitudes may be molded or changed by repeated exposure. In a study of college students, massive doses of pornographic films led to overestimates of uncommon sexual practices, decreased concern about the crime of rape, loss of sympathy for the women’s liberation movement, and, among men, a more callous attitude toward sex (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982, 1988).
Violent Pornography (X-rated videos in which the woman victim is shown to be enjoying the assault or rape). Known antisocial effects. This is one of the most dangerous types of combinations—sex and violence—although it is probably the violent content that takes priority. Men exposed to such material show increased aggression against women in laboratory studies and increased callousness in their attitudes (Donnerstein, 1984; Linz & Malamuth, 1993). But men exposed to nonsexual violence can show the same effect as well (Huston et al., 1992).

Non-X-Rated Sexual Aggression Against Women (broadcast or movie programming in which women are depicted as deriving pleasure from sexual abuse or assault). Probable antisocial effects. Such content may reinforce callous attitudes toward rape and rape victims.

Wilson, Linz, Donnerstein, and Stipp (1992) performed an interesting field experiment to investigate attitudes about rape. In 1990, NBC aired a made-for-TV movie titled She Said No, which concerned acquaintance rape. The researchers measured audience responses to the movie to see whether it would decrease acceptance of rape myths or date rape. Using a nationally representative sample, they randomly assigned 1,038 adult viewers to watch or not watch the movie over a special closed-circuit channel. When contacted the next day, the viewers answered questions about rape myths, which demonstrated that the movie had made an impact in altering perceptions of date rape. More tolerant attitudes might affect behavior as well. Another study correlated the viewing of wrestling on TV with date violence. Researchers studied 2,228 North Carolina high school students and found that watching was associated with having started a fight with a date and with other high-risk activities such as weapon carrying and drug use (DuRant, Champion, & Wolfson, 2006).

One expert claims that much of sexy advertising is pornographic because it dehumanizes women, borrows the poses and postures of bondage and sado-masochism, and perpetuates rape myths (Kilbourne, 1999). Many ads seem to imply that women don’t really mean “no” when they say it. In one ad, a woman is backing a woman against a wall. The ad says “NO” in big letters, and she is either laughing or screaming. In small letters at the bottom is the word sweat, and the ad is for deodorant. Another ad, for a trendy bar in Georgetown, shows a close-up of a cocktail, with the headline, “If your date won’t listen to reason, try a Velvet Hammer” (Kilbourne, 1993).

Sexualized Violence Against Women (R-rated videos that are less sexually explicit but far more violent than X-rated ones, often shown on cable TV or available in video stores). Probable antisocial effects. These do not involve rape but do contain scenes of women being tortured, murdered, or mutilated in a sexual context. This may be the single most important category for teenagers because it is more “mainstream” and represents an important genre of Hollywood “slice ‘em and dice ‘em” movies (e.g., Halloween I–V, Nightmare on Elm Street I–V, Friday the 13th I–VIII, Texas Chainsaw Massacre I–II, Scream I–III, etc.). Often, the title alone tells the tale: Hide and Go Shriek, Kiss Daddy Goodbye, Return to Horror High, Slaughter High, The Dorm That Dripped Blood, Chopping Mall, Murderlust, Deadtime Stories, Splatter University, Lady Stay Dead, I Dismember Mama, Watch Me When I Kill, Lunch Meat.
Because sex is something that is not usually discussed or observed, except in the media, teenagers who are faithful viewers of such movies may be learning that acting aggressively toward women is expected and normal. Studies show that exposure to such material can result in desensitization to sexual violence, both for young men and women (Donnerstein et al., 1987; Mullin & Linz, 1995). However, such studies cannot always be replicated (Linz & Donnerstein, 1988; Weaver, 1994). As two prominent researchers note, “Our research suggests that you need not look any further than the family’s own television set to find demeaning depictions of women available to far more viewers than pornographic material” (Linz & Donnerstein, 1988, p. 184).

Solutions

Clearly, there is a strong case to be made for the impact of sexual content in a variety of media on young, impressionable preteens and teens (J. D. Brown & Strasburger, 2007; Escobar-Chaves et. al., 2005; Strasburger, 2005). In a society that limits access to sexual information, teenagers will look to the media for answers to their questions. More important, the media may have a strong effect on teens without their even being aware of it, especially those whose parents do not inculcate in them a strong sense of “family values.” Important questions get answered by the media: “When is it okay to have sex?” “How do I know if I am in love?” “Is sex fun?” “Is sex risky?” Unfortunately, as we have seen, the media answers to these questions are usually not the healthy or accurate answers.

What changes in media would give American youth a healthier view of sex and sexuality? A number of possibilities come to mind:

1. **Widespread advertising of birth control in mainstream media (e.g., TV, magazines, radio).** Advertising birth control represents one means of increasing teenagers’ access to it. Such advertising needs to address the risks of pregnancy, not merely the cosmetic difference that birth control pills can make if a teenager has acne. Unless new products such as the morning-after pill are widely advertised, teenagers will not know about them or use them (see Figure 6.18). Comparative studies between the United States and Europe make it clear that countries that promote the use of birth control via advertising, sex education classes, and programming are rewarded with lower rates of teen pregnancy (Miller, 2000; Mueller et al., 2008; Strasburger et al., 2006). Most national surveys have documented that adults favor birth control advertising (Mozes, 2001), yet the media remain resistant. Given that eight studies now prove that making birth control available to teenagers does not increase the risk of early sexual intercourse, there is no longer any excuse to withhold access to it.

2. **Greater responsibility and accountability of mainstream media for producing healthy and accurate messages about sex and sexuality.** Entertainment industry executives need to realize that, like it or not, their product is educating American children and teenagers. Media have become one of the most important sources for sexual information for young people today (J. D. Brown et al., 2006; Strasburger,
2006a). Yet what they view on television and in the movies is almost counterproductive to healthy adolescence: frequent premarital sex and sex between unmarried partners, talk about infidelity on talk shows, graphic jokes and innuendoes in the movies, rape myths, and sexual violence. Where is the depiction of sexual responsibility? Where is the talk about the need for birth control or the risk of STDs? Where are the depictions of condom use when they are most needed in modern society? Why aren’t topics such as abortion, date rape, and rape myths portrayed and examined in greater detail (Navarro, 2007)? In the new millennium, the answer is that we cannot go back to the "golden age" of the 1950s, when sex was rarely discussed and Laura and Rob Petrie slept in separate beds on The Dick Van Dyke Show despite being married. Nor should censorship be tolerated in a free society. Voluntary restraint and good judgment on the part of Hollywood and television writers, producers, and directors, however, would go far in improving the current dismal state of programming (see Table 6.12). A return to the “family hours” of protected programming between 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. would be one useful idea. Boston Public, which aired at 7 p.m., featured such storylines as a high school girl trading oral sex for a boy’s agreement to withdraw from a student council race, a girl tossing her breast pads away in the hallway, and another high school girl’s sexual affair with one of the teachers. Unfortunately, as one TV critic notes, “Almost anything goes in primetime . . . TV says get used to it” (Salamon, 2000, p. 6WK).
Yet, in 2005, *Boston Public*'s writer-producer handled the very sensitive theme of emergency contraception being refused in a Catholic hospital emergency room extremely fairly and sensitively in a *Boston Legal* episode. Another positive development is the announcement of the “Pause” public education campaign by FOX and Kaiser Family Foundation that will try to teach teenagers to make wise decisions about difficult issues, including sex and teenage pregnancy (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2006). Clearly, Hollywood is capable of dealing with the theme of adolescent sexuality in a responsible way when it wants to.

### Table 6.12 Guide to Responsible Sexual Content in Media

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Guide to Responsible Sexual Content in Media</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recognize sex as a healthy and natural part of life.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent and child conversations about sex are important and healthy and should be encouraged.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Demonstrate that not only the young, unmarried, and beautiful have sexual relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not all affection and touching must culminate in sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portray couples having sexual relationships with feelings of affection, love, and respect for one another.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consequences of unprotected sex should be discussed or shown.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Miscarriage should not be used as a dramatic convenience for resolving an unwanted pregnancy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of contraceptives should be indicated as a normal part of a sexual relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoid associating violence with sex or love.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rape should be depicted as a crime of violence, not of passion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The ability to say “no” should be recognized and respected.</td>
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3. **Better taste in advertising** (see Exercises for a discussion of “taste”). When sex is used to sell products, it is cheapened and devalued. Manufacturers who pay for advertising and companies that produce it need to recognize that they, too, have a public health responsibility to produce ads that are not gratuitously provocative, suggestive, or demeaning (see Figure 6.19). Kilbourne (1999) should be “must” reading for all account executives.

4. **Incorporating the principles of media education into existing sex education programs.** Preliminary studies seem to indicate that a media education approach may be effective in decreasing children’s aggressiveness (Huesmann, Eron, Klein, Brice, & Fischer, 1983) and teenagers’ use of drugs (Austin & Johnson, 1997). There is no reason to think that helping children and teenagers decipher sexual content, the suggestiveness of advertising, and the conservatism of the broadcast industry regarding contraception would have anything but positive outcomes. In fact, a recent media literacy curriculum conducted at 22 school sites in Washington state
found that a five-lesson plan targeting 532 middle school students resulted in their being less likely to overestimate sexual activity among their peers and more aware of the truth about sex and sexual imagery in the media (Pinkleton, Austin, Cohen, Chen, & Fitzgerald, in press).

5. More and better counteradvertising. To date, only the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy has engaged in long-term efforts to counterprogram through the media (see Figure 6.20A). One organization has even taken on the abstinence movement (see Figure 6.20B). Although no data exist about their success, the communications literature about drugs and media does contain several successful efforts involving counteradvertising against tobacco and illicit drugs with teens as the primary target audience (see Chapter 7). On the other hand, scare tactics that exploit the fear of HIV/AIDS to try to prevent early teenage sexual activity are unethical and probably counterproductive (DeJong, Wolf, & Austin, 2001; Strasburger, 2005).

6. Greater sensitivity of parents to the influence of the media on children and adolescents. Many parents often seem to be “clueless” about the impact of media on their children and teenagers (Strasburger, 2006a), although a 2007 survey of 1,008 parents nationwide found that two thirds felt that they were “closely monitoring” their children’s media use (Rideout, 2007). The most important steps that parents can take are to set rules about TV viewing, monitor what shows are being watched, and keep TV sets out of the bedroom. A national study of 1,762 teenagers found that having a TV in the bedroom and having no rules about viewing correlate with viewing more sexual content (Kim et al., 2006).
7. More and better research. Three recent longitudinal studies now point to the media as one crucial factor in a teenager’s decision when to have sexual intercourse (Ashby et al., 2006; J. D. Brown et al., 2006; Collins et al., 2004). More studies have been funded by NIMH and are currently under way (National Institute on Child Health and Development [NICHD], 2000). But the amount of research on sex and the media pales in comparison to the 3,500 studies done on children and media violence. Of the eight major correlational studies, four are more than 10 years old and have major defects (Huston et al., 1998; Strasburger & Donnerstein, 2000). Considerably more research needs to be funded, and such research will need to be interdisciplinary, using a variety of methods and a variety of populations, and will need to take into account developmental, gender, and ethnic differences. For example:

- How do different groups of children and teenagers view different sexual content? Do different groups use different types of media to find sexual content? Is that content interpreted differently? Are there developmental differences in how teens of different ages interpret sexual content? (A few preliminary studies of this kind have already been done [Aubrey, Harrison, Kramer, & Yellin, 2003; J. D. Brown et al., 2005; Rivadeneyra & Ward, 2005; Tolman, Kim, Schooler, & Sorsoli, 2007].)

- Do teens from different ethnic groups seek out programming unique to their own ethnic group?
• How do individuals negotiate sexual behavior in the media? What interpersonal contexts exist for sexual behavior? Do different media portray sexuality differently?

• Do media change teens’ knowledge about sex and sexuality, their emotions concerning sex, or their attitudes? Regular adolescent viewers of soap operas could be recruited and be shown “future episodes” of their favorite program, which might be manipulated to show different messages, for example.

The barriers to doing this type of research are considerable (Huston et al., 1998; Strasburger, 1997). School systems and parents need to grant access to researchers, and foundations need to fund such efforts. Foundations need to recognize media research as a new and much-needed priority. In addition, society needs to accept the fact that teenagers should be able to give consent for such research on their own and that parents can be informed “passively” about ongoing studies (e.g., a letter explaining the research, along with the opportunity to withdraw the child if need be) rather than “actively” (e.g., having to send back signed permission forms) (Santelli, 1997; Strasburger, 1998).

Conclusion: Unanswered Questions

Despite this discussion, not all media are unhealthy or irresponsible for young people. Some shows have dealt responsibly with the issue of teenage sexual activity and teenage pregnancy: Beverly Hills 90210, Dawson’s Creek, Boston Legal, and Felicity, at times, and several others. Made-for-TV movies such as Babies Having Babies and Daddy have used extremely frank language to good, educational effect. The 1980s cop drama Cagney and Lacey contained one of the first instances of a TV mother talking to her son about responsibility and birth control. On St. Elsewhere, the only known mention of a diaphragm on prime-time TV was aired during the 1987–1988 season, although it required that the user be the chief of obstetrics and gynecology to accomplish it. But these are the exceptions rather than the rule on American television. And, unfortunately, it has not been the tragedy of teenage pregnancy or the high rates of early adolescent sexual activity that have blunted the red pencil of the network censors but rather the appearance of AIDS as a national health emergency. But here, too, there may be much educational programming made possible that will benefit teenagers. One example is the 1987–1988 episode of L.A. Law that discussed the risk of AIDS in heterosexual intercourse but also included good advice on birth control and choosing sexual partners (see Strasburger, 1989). How do adolescents process the sexual content that they view? Do different ethnic groups interpret the same content differently? Can teenagers learn abstinence or the need to use birth control from what they view in the media? Until the political and funding climate changes, and until adults understand that asking children and teenagers about sex will not provoke them into early sexual activity, we will simply have to speculate about many of these crucial issues.
As one author sadly notes,

I’ve often wondered what it would be like if we taught young people swimming the same way we teach sexuality. If we told them that swimming was an important adult activity, one they will all have to be skilled at when they grow up, but we never talked with them about it. We never showed them the pool. We just allowed them to stand outside closed doors and listen to all the splashing. Occasionally, they might catch a glimpse of partially-clothed people going in and out of the door to the pool and maybe they’d find a hidden book on the art of swimming, but when they asked a question about how swimming felt or what it was about, they would be greeted with blank or embarrassed looks. Suddenly, when they turn 18 we would fling open the doors to the swimming pool and they would jump in. Miraculously, some might learn to tread water, but many would drown. (Roberts, 1983, p. 10)

Exercises

1. Taste. Several questions about “taste”: Whose “taste” do we mean? Ours? Yours? Hollywood’s? This is a recurring problem in discussing the media and one we do not take lightly. In this volume, we have erred on the side of public health and psychology in discussing what is questionable “taste” and what represents “good” versus “bad” programming. Although we have tried to give examples, we have left the discussion purposefully vague because we acknowledge that taste can vary considerably. But when it comes to “bad” taste or “questionable” programming that is unhealthy, we would tend to agree with a paraphrase of Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s definition of pornography: “We know it when we see it.”
   (a) Should the media be criticized on such grounds?
   (b) If so, whose “taste” should be used as the “gold standard”? Is an objective standard possible?
   (c) In making judgments about “taste,” what sociocultural factors enter into the discussion?
   (d) What about offensive and indecent language? Consider the following quote from a newspaper columnist: “A few months back, the solons of the Federal Communications Commission found that a term for bovine excrement is ‘so grossly offensive’ as to be ‘presumptively profane.’ OK, except that, according to the FCC, a certain nickname for Richard, and its two-syllable version ending in ‘head,’ don’t violate this standard. These terms are ‘understandably offensive to some viewers’ but not ‘sufficiently vulgar, explicit, or graphic descriptions of sexual organs or activities to support a finding of patent offensiveness.’ As pretty much any 13-year-old could have told the FCC, it ordered the wrong expletive deleted” (Marcus, 2006, p. B3). Do you agree with Marcus or with the FCC? If you were a member of the FCC, how would you go about establishing rules for appropriate language on TV?
During the February 1, 2004, halftime show, Janet Jackson revealed a
breast for 2 seconds to 89 million viewers on national TV (see Figure
6.21). CBS was fined $500,000 for the incident. FCC Chairman Michael
Powell labeled the display “classless, crass (and) deplorable.” Spike Lee
said, “What’s going to be next? It’s getting crazy, and it’s all down to
money. Money and fame. Somehow the whole value system has been
upended” (CNN Entertainment, February 4, 2004).

1. Did you see the halftime show? What did you think?
2. Do you agree with Michael Powell and Spike Lee or with Frank
Rich (quoted at the beginning of this chapter)?
3. Should CBS have been fined half a million dollars?
4. Was this positive or negative publicity for Janet Jackson? Is there
such a thing as bad publicity anymore?

Figure 6.21 The Famous “Wardrobe Malfunction”

2. Prosocial Content. How would you go about making a prosocial soap opera
that would appeal to teenagers and young adults and contain sexually responsible
language, discussions, and behavior but not lose the audience with a “goody-two-
shoes” program?
3. **Sex Education.** Currently, the federal government only funds abstinence-only sex education ($176 million/year in 2006). Since 1998, more than $1 billion has been spent on such sex education (SIECUS, 2006), despite any convincing evidence that abstinence-only sex education actually works (Government Accountability Office, 2006; Santelli et al., 2006). The most recent study was commissioned by the U.S. Congress and surveyed 2,057 youth from big cities and rural communities. Their average age on entering an abstinence-only program was 11 to 12, and they were followed up 4 years later and compared with students from the same communities who did not participate. There was no difference in rates of sexual intercourse, age at first sex, or numbers of sexual partners (Trenholm et al., 2007). If abstinence-only sex education is not effective, should the government be funding it? Should the government fund comprehensive sex education as well?

4. **Media Literacy.** Is there a media literacy approach to sex education that might work to decrease the impact of media on sexual attitudes and beliefs? What components would it have? How would sex education teachers be able to avoid “family values” types of issues if they discussed programming with sexual content?

5. **Doing Sexuality Research.** How could research be sensitively designed to assess what children learn from sexual content in the media?

6. **Contraceptive Ads.** Figure 6.22 shows two actual print ads for condoms. For what magazines would each be appropriate? Do the ads target different audiences? What other possibilities can you think of that might appeal specifically to all teenagers? To teenagers who are African American or Hispanic? To males? To females? Figure 6.18 shows actual print ads for emergency contraceptive pills and one for a product that produces an early medical abortion. How do these ads differ from other, “mainstream” ads? What is the target audience? Are these ads effective? In June 2007, both CBS and FOX rejected an ad for Trojans because “advertising must stress health-related uses rather than the prevention of pregnancy,” according to one network executive (Newman, 2007). The ad shows women at a bar, surrounded by pigs. One pig goes to use the bathroom, returns with a condom he’s purchased, and is magically transformed into an attractive man. The tagline is “Evolve: Use a condom every time.” Do you think this ad is creative? Offensive? Effective?

7. **HIV/AIDS Prevention.** You are a school principal and are asked to view a sex ed video for possible inclusion in the curriculum. On it, a terminally ill AIDS patient, cachectic and stripped to the waist, stares straight at the camera and says, “Kids, if you have sex once, with the wrong person, you may die.” Your brother died from AIDS a year ago, and this video affects you deeply. Should you approve it for use in the classroom?

8. **The Internet.** (1) In Shanghai, China, the government is providing sex education via the Internet (Lou, Zhao, Gao, & Shah, 2006). Is this a good idea? Can you see any drawbacks? (2) In the most recent sample of 1,500 Internet users, ages 10 to 17 years, 42% reported exposure to online pornography (two-thirds unwanted) (Wolak et al., 2007). What solutions exist to shield children and teens from online pornography?
from online pornography? The Internet’s oversight agency has suggested an “.xxx” domain for pornography on the Web (Jesdanun, 2007). Would that work?

9. **Celebrities.** In March 2007, the Associated Press initiated a self-imposed week-long ban on reporting anything about Paris Hilton (CNN.com, 2007). Was that a reasonable thing to do? A month earlier, *Newsweek*’s cover story was “Girls Gone Wild: What Are Celebs Teaching Kids?” (Deveny & Kelley, 2007). Find the story and discuss it. Why are Paris Hilton and Britney Spears celebrities, and should they be? How do you think that 16-year-old Jamie Lynn Spears’ pregnancy will affect preteens and teens? Who determines fame in American culture, and how is it determined?

10. **Young Girls.** Recently, the American Psychological Association issued its report on the increasing sexualization of young girls (Zurbriggen et al., 2007). In covering the story, one news reporter wrote, “Ten-year-old girls can slide their low-cut jeans over ‘eye-candy’ panties. French maid costumes, garter belt included are available in preteen sizes. Barbie now comes in a ‘bling-bling’ style, replete with halter top and go-go boots . . . American girls, say experts, are increasingly being fed a cultural catnip of products and images that promote looking and acting sexy” (Weiner, 2007, p. HE01). Is this a relatively new problem or an ongoing one? Read
the Executive Summary of the report and see if you agree with the many recommendations (www.apa.org). How easy would it be to change the portrayal of sexuality in American society, and what will it take to do so?

11. **Teen pregnancy and abortion.** In 2006 and 2007, several movies seemed to portray teen pregnancy and single motherhood in a new light. According to one prominent columnist, “By some screenwriter consensus, abortion has become the right-to-choose that’s never chosen. In *Knocked Up*, it was referred to as ‘shmash-morton.’ In *Juno*, the abortion clinic looks like a punk-rock tattoo parlor” (Goodman, 2008, p. A8). Other observers agree (Rickey, 2007, p. B8). Do you think this is a new trend? Is it “healthy,” and will it have real-life repercussions?

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