

# Sex on TV Can 'Artificially Age' Children Study Says

by Mary DeTurrís Poust

If you've ever watched television with a 9-year-old, you probably learned the hard way that the electronic hearth is not exactly a warm and cozy gathering place for families, even with rating systems, parental controls and the so-called "family viewing" hour. Those astute enough to program a V-chip and dedicated enough to supervise their children at all times in order to avoid the sexual innuendo, sexual dialogue and sexual behavior that is part and parcel of just about every hit show, still are likely to get sideswiped by commercials and promos that could make the proverbial sailor blush.

In a world where lingerie and erectile dysfunction are not considered too lewd for family viewing, it's hard to know where to draw the line. Do we have to get rid of the television set altogether, or is there a way for families to coexist with Hollywood's version of Pandora's box? Does writing a letter to a network or advertiser make a difference? What's a family to do?

## **Needed: Supervision**

"The most important thing is that children should not be allowed to have television sets in their bedrooms. Period. There's no good reason for it. Children, when they're watching TV in their rooms, are, generally speaking, watching unsupervised, and a lot of surveys indicate that kids who watch TV alone are watching programs they know their parents don't approve of," said Melissa Caldwell, senior director of programs for the Parents Television Council in Los Angeles. Reports indicate that almost two thirds of U.S. children have television sets in their bedrooms.

Caldwell also said that, whenever possible parents should supervise their children when they watch TV, and that beyond that there "needs to be an element of activism" on the part of parents. "Silence gives consent. If no one is speaking out against this kind of programming, the networks will assume that we're all just fine with it, and we all know that's not true." She said that the Fox-TV shows "The O.C.," "Family Guy," "War at Home" and "American Dad" are among the worst offenders on television, grabbing not only numerous teenage viewers but children as young as 2 to 11 years old as well.

A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation last fall found that the number of sexual scenes on TV has nearly doubled since 1998. "Sex on TV 4," the groups biennial study on sex in the media, found that of the 20 shows most watched by teens, 70 percent included sexual content and 45 percent included sexual behavior. According to the study, "nearly three out of four 15 to 17 year-olds say sex on TV influences the sexual behavior of kids their age." And a telephone survey of children ages 12 to 17 showed that watching TV with sexual content "artificially aged" children, leading them to behave sexually in ways that are beyond their years. "TV tends to act as a sort of super peer. Children watching TV will tend to accept the behavior of other children on TV as normal," explained Caldwell. "...The research seems to show that children who are exposed to high levels of sex in the media are likely to engage in more sophisticated sexual behavior at an earlier age than they otherwise might."

## **A Commercial Concern**

Even if parents manage to steer their children clear of shows with sexual content, they can't escape the sexually charged commercials for everything from Viagra to beer. Robert Peters, president of the New York-based Morality in Media, told OSV that the No. 1 complaint his organization receives about network television is related to advertisements or promotions. "People who write letters to Morality in Media are doing exactly what the industry has told them to do: If you don't like a particular program, don't watch it." But you cannot avoid this garbage if it is in an ad for some product that is sexual or violent or vulgar," said Peters.

"The former enforcement bureau of the Federal Communications Commission had defined indecency down to lewdness. Basically as long as the networks steer clear of overt copulation, and it's got to go on for a while, nothing on TV is considered indecent."

Peters said that although there are things parents can do to protect their children to a certain extent, he suggests praying and being the best moral teacher you can be, at some point the culture interferes with even the best

parenting skills. "Once your children walk out that door, they are going to be with children who are exposed to a steady diet of this stuff, and they are going to affect your children," he said. "Society shares a responsibility to protect children from things that can hurt them. The large majority of parents feel they are fighting a losing battle. Hard as they try, they just see their children being more influenced by culture than by them, and that's the reality."

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