



News Release

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TV SEX GETTING “SAFER,” KAISER FAMILY FOUNDATION STUDY FINDS

Two-Thirds Of All Shows Still Include Sexual Content, But More Mention Waiting, Protection, Or Consequences Of Sex

BEVERLY HILLS, CA – While the amount of sex on television remains high, TV sex is more likely than in previous years to include some reference to “safer sex” issues such as waiting to have sex, using protection, or the possible consequences of unprotected sex. The findings – part of the Kaiser Family Foundation’s biennial study of sexual messages on TV – were released today at a Beverly Hills conference of television industry writers, producers and executives.

According to the study, one in four (26%) shows with talk about or depictions of sexual intercourse also included some reference to a safer sex issue, nearly double the rate found four years ago (14%). Among shows with sexual content involving teen characters, one in three (34%) included a safer sex reference, again nearly double the rate found four years ago (18%). And in a special analysis of the top-20 shows among teen viewers, nearly half (45%) of the episodes that included a reference to sexual intercourse also included a reference to a safer sex topic.

“From a public health perspective, it’s encouraging to see this trend toward greater attention to safer sex issues on TV,” said Vicky Rideout, a vice president at the Kaiser Family Foundation who oversaw the study. “This generation is immersed in the media, so when Hollywood makes safer sex sexier – whether it’s abstinence or protection – that’s all to the good,” she added.

Among the other findings:

- Two-thirds of all shows (64%) have some sexual content, including one in three (32%) with sexual behaviors (the rest have talk about sex). This rate of sexual content is similar to that found two years ago (68%), up from about half of all shows (56%) four years ago.
- One in seven shows (14%) now include sexual intercourse, either depicted or strongly implied, an increase from 10% of shows two years ago, and 7% four years ago.
- In the top-20 shows among teen viewers, eight in ten episodes included some sexual content (83%), including one in five (20%) with sexual intercourse.
- Overall, 15% of all shows with any sexual content – including those with more modest content such as talk about sex, kissing or touching – included a safer sex reference, up from 10% two years ago and 9% four years ago. The rates for certain programs with more advanced portrayals were much higher, as noted above (for example, in shows with sexual intercourse, where the rate was 26%).

(more)

“If you turn on the TV today, the odds are that you’ll be watching some type of sexual content, especially if you’re a teen,” Ms. Rideout noted. “Given how high the rates of STDs and unwanted pregnancy are today, making sure more of that content is about safer sex is an important step in the right direction,” she added.

The study, *Sex on TV 3: Content and Context*, was jointly designed by Foundation staff and University of California, Santa Barbara Communications Professor Dale Kunkel, and was conducted by Dr. Kunkel and a team of colleagues. This year’s study – the third in a series conducted every two years – covers shows airing between 7 AM and 11 PM during the 2001-2002 television season. Researchers examined a random sample of more than 1,100 shows across all genres other than daily newscasts, sports and children’s programming, including movies, sitcoms, dramas, soap operas, talk shows, news magazines and reality shows. Ten networks representing the range of TV programming were included: the top four broadcasters (ABC, CBS, Fox, and NBC), public television (PBS), an independent channel (KTLA, a WB affiliate), the top basic cable networks (Lifetime, TNT, and USA), and one premium channel (HBO).

Some shows cited in the study highlighted the risks of sex – portraying characters who have HIV/AIDs or are facing unwanted pregnancies, for example – while others simply normalized safer sex behaviors by having a condom on a bedside table. Still others showed characters choosing to wait to have sex. Examples include:

-- An episode of *The Young and the Restless* on CBS in which a mother and daughter talk about how to know when you’re ready to have sex;

-- A scene on the syndicated show *Clueless* in which a high school senior, planning to have sex for the first time, stops to get condoms first;

-- A storyline from the NBC drama *ER* in which an aspiring rapper who is secretly bisexual gets a rapid HIV test and finds he has the virus;

-- An episode of the Fox teen drama *Boston Public* in which a high school student comes face-to-face with the consequences of her unplanned pregnancy.

The results are being presented at a conference for entertainment industry leaders at the Museum of Television and Radio in Beverly Hills, from 9:30 a.m. to noon today (Feb. 4). Participants include Paramount Television President Garry Hart and Yvette Bowser, executive producer of the UPN show *Half & Half*, which featured a storyline on Monday, Feb. 3 about a pregnancy scare and an HIV test.

Copies of the Executive Summary of the Sex on TV study (publication #3324) and the full report on which it is based (#3325) are available online at www.kff.org or by calling 1-800-656-4533.

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