



A Biennial Report of  
the Kaiser Family  
Foundation  
2001



# SAFE AND SOUND

## Executive Summary



# KEY FINDINGS:

Two out of every three shows on TV include **sexual content**, an increase from about half of all shows during the 97/98 television season.

## Introduction:

There are nearly four million cases of sexually transmitted diseases among American teenagers every year, and more than three-quarters of a million teen pregnancies. In this environment, the messages young people receive about sex are vitally important, including those they receive from the media.

While there are many other more dominant influences on adolescent sexual development, TV's sexual messages clearly play a part as well – helping not only to inform young people, but also to shape their ideas of what other people their age are doing, saying and thinking. In survey after survey, teens and young adults tell researchers that television is one of their top sources of information and ideas about sex, generally following schools, parents and peers.

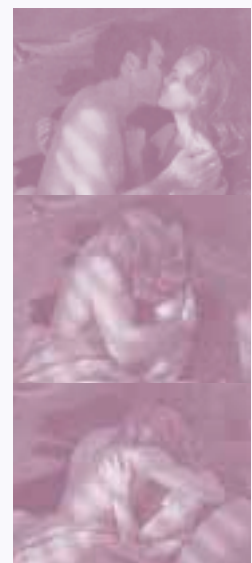
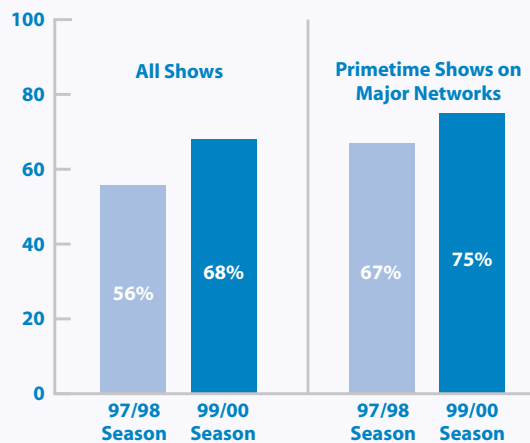
The purpose of this study is to examine the amount and nature of sexual messages on television today. Because *how* sex is portrayed on TV is just as important as *how much* sex is portrayed, this report goes beyond simply counting the amount of sex on TV, to look at the context in which sex is shown and the messages about sex that are presented. In particular, the research pays special attention to whether or not shows with sexual content include any reference to issues such as abstinence or safer sex.

The Kaiser Family Foundation has committed to conduct this study once every two years to provide an accurate yardstick by which to measure changes in sexual content on television. The first study looked at programming from the 1997-98 television season. This year's study covers the 1999-2000 television season, and is based on an analysis of more than 1100 randomly selected programs representing all genres other than newscasts, sports, and children's shows. Throughout this summary, changes from the 1997-98 television season are noted.

Sixty-eight percent of all shows include sexual content, up from 56% in 97/98. These shows average more than four scenes with sexual content per hour. About one out of every four shows (27%) on television includes *sexual behaviors*; the remainder feature characters *talking about sex*.

The most widely viewed shows – those airing in primetime on the major broadcast networks – are even more likely to include sexual content. Three out of four of these shows include sexual content, up from two out of three during the 97/98 season.

Percent of shows that contain sexual content



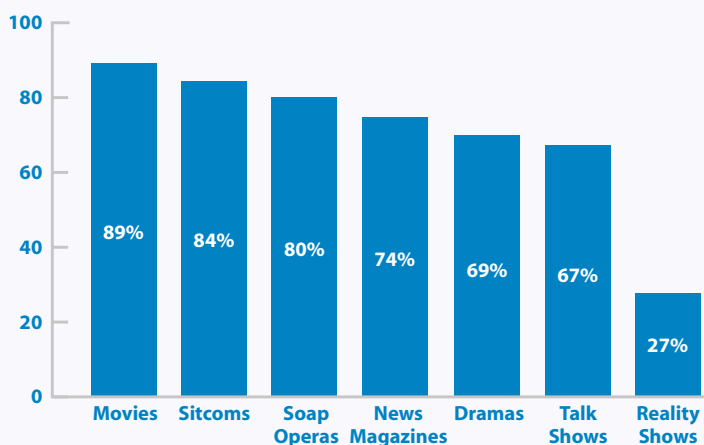
# KEY FINDINGS:

Sexual content appears frequently across a wide variety of programming genres. There was a substantial increase in the percentage of situation comedies that included sexual content.

Each genre of television programming studied includes sexual content, ranging from just over a quarter of reality shows to about nine out of ten movies.

The most significant *increases* in likelihood to include sexual content occurred in situation comedies (from 56% to 84% of all episodes) and dramas (from 58% to 69% of episodes). There were no genres in which there was a statistically significant decrease in sexual content.

**Percent of all shows that contain sexual content, by genre**



## Examples: Types of sexual content

### Talk about sex:

Sharon and Johnny, a twenty-something couple, are engaged to be married. While visiting their friend and neighbor Pete, Johnny discovers that Sharon has been discussing their uninteresting sex life with him. After leaving Pete's apartment, Johnny quizzes Sharon about this in the hallway of their apartment building, asking her bluntly if she has a problem with

their sex life. She replies gently, "No baby, I love what we do. It's great. We've gotten really good at it. If anything, I think we've pretty much perfected it." They then agree they would like to try other, more exciting things in bed. Johnny asks seductively, "Where do we start?" Sharon giggles and at that moment, Pete, who has apparently been eavesdropping on their conversation from inside of his apartment, slides a "Kama Sutra" book about eastern love-making techniques under his door and out into the hallway. Pete yells "Page 11.... and you're welcome!" (Two Guys and a Girl, ABC)

### Physical flirting:

Bobby, a young paramedic, has just pulled up to a gas station late at night to fill up the tank of his ambulance between calls. As Bobby begins to pump the gas, a car playing loud music pulls up next to him. One of the young women in the car steps out of the passenger side and begins dancing sensuously to the beat of the music. Noticing the attention she is attracting from Bobby, she runs her fingers through her long hair and sits on the hood of her car while still moving to the beat of the song. As Bobby begins to hum the tune and

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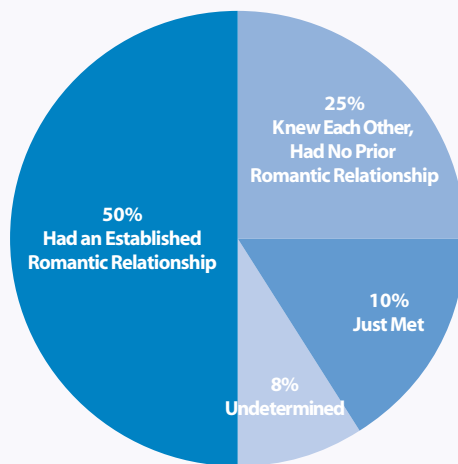
# KEY FINDINGS:

**Sexual intercourse is depicted or strongly implied in one of every ten shows on TV.**

Across the entire sample of programs analyzed for this study, 10% showed couples engaged in, just starting, or just finishing intercourse, an increase from 7% during the 97/98 season.

Of those scenes where intercourse is either depicted or strongly implied, half involve characters who have an established relationship with one another, a quarter involve couples who know each other but don't have an established relationship, and 16% involve couples who have just met.

## Relationships of characters involved in sexual intercourse



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return the woman's gaze, she smiles directly at him, gets up, and begins dancing again. This performance is clearly for Bobby and she now motions for him to join her. He laughs to himself as if he should refuse her offer, but then slowly dances over to join her. As the two begin to dance very close together outside of the gas station, the scene and the episode come to a close.

(Third Watch, NBC)

### **Kissing:**

Meg and Tony, two young adults, are dating one another. Meg has come to Tony's house and cooked him an exquisite Italian dinner, which he clearly enjoyed. "You can cook 'Italiano' for me anytime," he says gratefully. Meg smiles and responds, "With satisfaction guaranteed." He gazes into her eyes deeply and asks, "I guess it's my turn then?" She replies, "Well, I guess so," as he takes her hand and pulls her up from her chair into his arms and kisses her passionately. Their kiss is interrupted when Meg says coyly, "You know, I really should do the dishes." Tony shrugs off the distraction, takes her in his arms again and

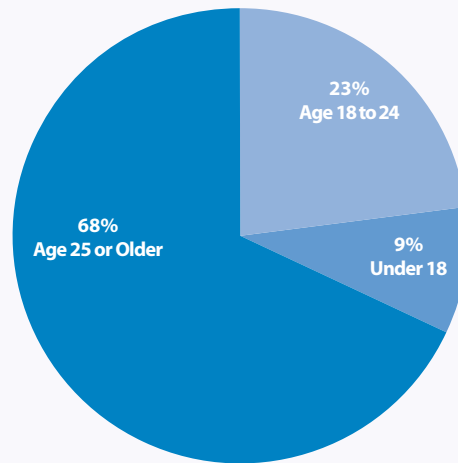
gently kisses her neck and shoulders as he pulls her to the couch. He kneels on top of her and continues to kiss her lips and neck as she settles down into the sofa. Then suddenly, Meg gets an extremely disturbed look on her face as she pulls out another woman's bra from under the sofa cushion. "What's this?" she pleads. He grimaces silently, looking confused, as the scene comes to a close.

(Young and the Restless, CBS)



Two-thirds (68%) of the characters involved in the intercourse-related scenes were adults appearing to be 25 or older, about a quarter (23%) appeared to be young adults ages 18-24, and 9% appeared to be under 18.

### Apparent age of characters involved in sexual intercourse



#### Intimate touching:

The scene opens with Max and Sky, who are having an affair, lying in bed together. Max is dressed in a robe and Sky is wearing a slip and bra. She lies between his legs while he massages her shoulders as they discuss Max's wife. Soon, Sky turns around to face him, and begins to caress his chest and kiss his neck. He objects very gently, saying, "This is probably not the best time for this." As she kisses his neck

more vigorously, she counters with, "Ah, it's the worst time, which has always been the very best time for us." He appears to acquiesce while she kisses his chest, moving her head down lower and lower towards his lap as the scene fades to an end.

(One Life To Live, ABC)

#### Sexual intercourse strongly implied:

Ben, a young college student, has met an attractive 26 year old named Maggie. The two are clearly interested in one another, but Ben becomes wary once he discovers she is married. Maggie then propositions him aggressively. She comes to his apartment and tells him, "I want to have an affair with you. I am an adult. I understand and accept the implications of that. The real risk is mine. I won't bore you or involve you with the details of my marriage." Maggie hands Ben a hotel room key and asks

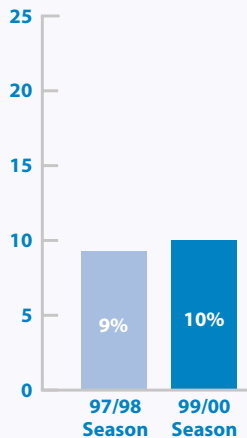
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# KEY FINDINGS:

Of all shows with sexual content, one in ten includes a reference to **safer sex** or the possible risks or responsibilities of sex.

Ten percent of all TV shows that include sexual content also make at least a passing reference to the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, about the same as the 97/98 season, when 9% of shows with sexual content included a reference to such topics (this was not a statistically significant change).

## Of all shows with sexual content, the percent that also contain any reference to sexual risks or responsibilities



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him to meet her there that night. Ben ponders his decision all day, but finally goes to join her. The moment he opens the door to the hotel room, they embrace and begin kissing passionately as he lifts her off of the ground. He removes her blouse, revealing a black lace bra and exposing a tattoo on her lower back. "I like your butterfly tattoo," he says, and she replies, "That's not my only one." They continue to kiss and touch one another as the scene ends. They wake the next morning together in the room.

(Felicity, KTLA/WB)

### Sexual intercourse depicted:

Jack and Audrey are two young female roommates living in New York. Jack has just had an emotional talk with her ex-fiancee and returns to her apartment hoping her roommate will console her. Jack opens the door, walks inside, and calls out, "Audrey?" There is no reply, so Jack begins to scan the apartment. Her eye is quickly caught by some items on the floor in the hallway leading to Audrey's bedroom.

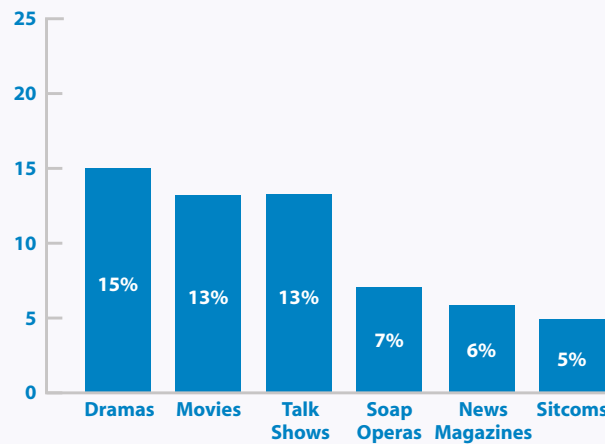
In a trail leading toward the bedroom are a pair of men's boxer shorts, followed by a silky black bra, then some female panties, and lastly, a pair of blue jeans. Jack takes a small step toward the hallway. The bedroom door is open and she can see Audrey having sex with a man who is never identified in the show. Audrey is laughing out loud and playfully rolls over, changing positions with her partner in the bed. Her legs are shown wrapped around the man's torso, with the two of them tangled in the sheets, as the scene quickly closes.

(Jack and Jill, KTLA/WB)



Certain genres of programming are more likely than others to make reference to safer sex or the risks of sexual activity. Dramas are the *most* likely to include such references, and comedies the *least* likely.

### Of all shows with sexual content, the percent that also contain any reference to sexual risks or responsibilities, by genre



In addition to identifying the proportion of shows making *any reference* to safer sex issues, the study also identified the percentage of shows that placed a *significant emphasis* on safer sex issues, making them a major theme of the show as a whole. During the 99/00 season, 2% of shows with sexual content featured one of these topics as a major theme of the program, compared to 1% of all shows with sexual content during the 97/98 season (not a statistically significant difference).

## Examples: References to the possible risks or responsibilities of sex

### Reference to abstinence:

Meghan and Kenny are brother and sister. She is a junior, and he is a freshman in high school. Meghan walks into their older brother Cameron's room and finds Kenny fumbling

through Cameron's "sex drawer." Meghan notices Kenny is holding a condom and asks if he is having sex with his girlfriend. "Not yet," he tells her, but he says they have talked about it. Kenny then asks Meghan what her first time was like. She replies sharply, "How do you know I've even had a first time?" They talk further and Meghan reveals that she came really close once but didn't do it. "It was sort of a given we would sleep together but, for some reason — I have no idea why — I just couldn't go through with it. Actually, no, I do know why. I wasn't

ready. We broke up a couple of months later so I guess I'm glad I waited." Kenny asks, "So, how do you know when you are ready?" Meghan says, "At the very least, make sure you really care about each other .... It's what I'm holding out for."  
(Get Real, Fox)

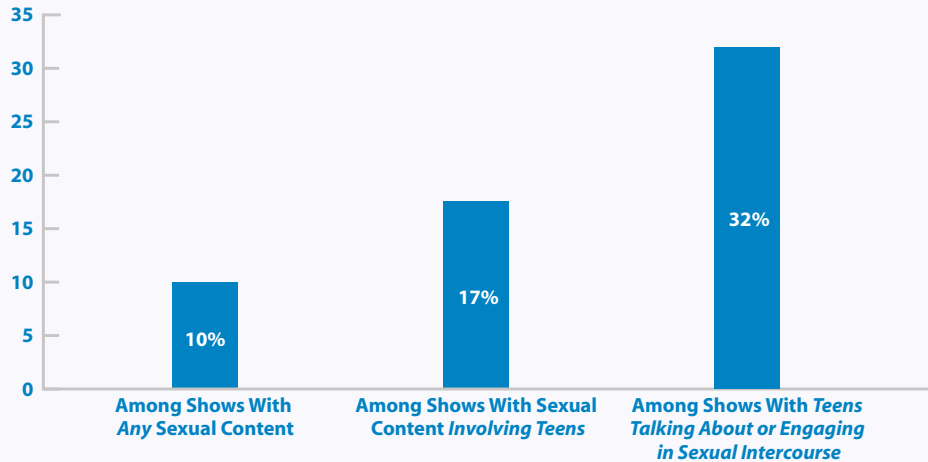
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# KEY FINDINGS:

Programs that depict **teen characters** in sexual situations are much more likely than other shows to include references to the risks or responsibilities of sex.

Nearly one in ten shows (9%) on TV includes some sexual content involving teens, about the same as the 97/98 season (8%). While the overall number of shows that include teen-related sexual content has stayed the same, it has become more common to see teen characters involved in sexual intercourse on television. Two years ago, 3% of all characters involved in intercourse were teens; today that figure has jumped to 9%.

## Percent of shows that contain any reference to sexual risks or responsibilities



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### Reference to condoms:

Felicity and her boyfriend, David, are trying to have sex for the first time, but repeatedly encounter some unusual distractions. This time around, they make it into David's bed and are kissing and pursuing foreplay under the covers. As their ardor grows, David pulls out a condom and begins to unwrap it. At exactly the moment that he tears open the package, Felicity's beeper goes off, "Beep, Beep, Beep!!" David jokes, "This condom has an alarm on it."

An emergency with Felicity's dog provides another interruption that postpones their plans. David is left shaking his head as Felicity apologizes but scurries away to deal with the problem involving her dog, Lucky. (Felicity, KTLA/WB)

### Reference to unplanned pregnancy:

Two young adults, Carly and Jason, have had an unsteady relationship in the past, including some sexual encounters. Jason is fond of Carly's young son Michael, but is wary of her because she has a reputation for "sleeping around." Carly has a strong desire to develop a stable relationship with Jason, and she flies into a jealous rage one night when she sees Jason slow dancing with another girl at a club. Upset, Carly turns to Jason's best friend, Sonny, for comfort. One thing leads to another and they end up having unprotected sex, from which Carly gets pregnant. Jason learns of the affair



Shows that depict teens in sexual situations – especially those with teen characters involved in sexual intercourse – are much more likely than other shows to include references to the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.

Type of show	Percent of all shows on TV	Percent that include any reference to sexual risks or responsibilities
Shows with <i>any</i> sexual content	68%	10%
Shows with <i>sexual intercourse</i>	10%	25%
Shows with <i>any</i> sexual content involving <i>teens</i>	9%	17%
Shows with <i>teens talking about or engaging in sexual intercourse</i>	3%	32%

In addition to making more references to safer sex issues, the study found that shows with teen-related sexual content are also much more likely to feature such topics as a *major theme of the program* (8%) than are other shows with sexual content (2%).

and leaves town without saying goodbye to Carly or her son. Devastated by her unplanned pregnancy as well as the pain she has caused Jason by having sex with his best friend, Carly talks over her situation with her mother. “Didn’t it ever occur to either of you to use some protection,” Carly’s mother complains. The two of them discuss the prospect of an abortion while Carly wrestles with her guilt about having had sex with Sonny. (General Hospital, ABC)

**Reference to emotional consequences:** Pacey and Andy, two high school students, had previously developed a committed romantic relationship. While they were together, Andy experienced some psychological problems and she was sent to a residential treatment facility. During her stay there, Andy had sex with another patient. After returning home, she and Pacey tried to resume their relationship. Soon, however, Pacey learns of her infidelity and is upset that she has cheated on him. Pacey takes time to think through the prospect of forgiving her. Finally, he conveys his decision that he cannot be involved with her anymore. Andy is

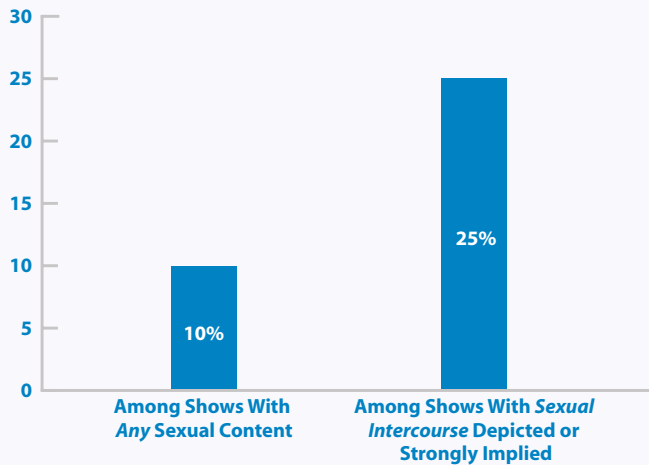
distraught and asks him to stop punishing her for the affair. Sobbing, she says, “I slept with another guy six months ago. I knew it was wrong when I did it ... How many times do I have to say [I’m sorry]?” Pacey replies firmly, “Andy, if you wanted to sleep with him even for just a second, then maybe it wasn’t wrong. Maybe it was just your heart’s way of telling you I’m not the one. Because that’s what my heart is telling me right now.” Andy continues crying and quickly leaves. As a result of her sexual behavior, she has destroyed her relationship with Pacey and caused great pain for both of them. (Dawson’s Creek, KTLA/WB)

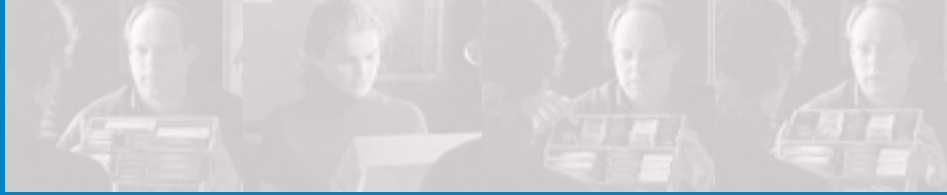
# KEY FINDINGS:

Programs that either depict or strongly imply **sexual intercourse** are much more likely than other shows to include references to the risks or responsibilities of sex.

References to issues such as safer sex or the consequences of sex are not necessarily appropriate in all shows with sexual content – for example, in a show with a couple flirting with one another, or engaging in a first kiss. These topics are particularly relevant in shows in which couples are clearly involved in sexual intercourse, and the data from this study show that such programs are in fact more likely than others to include references to safer sex topics. One in four shows with sexual intercourse include such references (compared to 10% of *all shows* with sexual content). This is a significant increase from the 97/98 season, when one in ten shows with sexual intercourse included references to sexual health issues.

**Percent of shows that contain any reference to sexual risks or responsibilities**





## Methodology:

This study was conducted for the Foundation by Professor Dale Kunkel of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and several colleagues working under his direction, including Kirstie Cope-Farrar, Erica Biely and Wendy Jo Maynard Farinola. Professor Edward Donnerstein also advised on this project. The study was designed and analyzed in consultation with Victoria Rideout, Vice President at The Kaiser Foundation. Ms. Rideout authored this summary of the study.

All analysis was conducted by a group of trained coders who underwent extensive preparation, and whose performance was systematically monitored to ensure strong inter-coder reliability.

### **The sample of programming included in the study:**

This study is based on programming from the 1999-2000 television season, aired from October 1999 through March 2000. The study analyzes a total of 1114 shows, covering the full range of TV genres other than newscasts, sports events, and children's shows. The sample includes 938 shows from a composite week of randomly-selected programming across ten channels, as well as 176 additional primetime broadcast network shows from a two-week over-sample.

The main analyses in this study are based on the 938 shows in the composite week sample; the analyses of primetime programming include the additional 176 shows from the primetime over-sample.

The ten channels in the study represent all segments of the television industry, including broadcast networks, syndicated programming, public television, basic cable and premium cable. The channels included in the study are ABC, CBS, Fox, HBO, Lifetime, NBC, TNT, PBS, USA, and the WB affiliate in Los Angeles, KTLA.

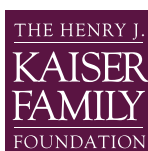
### **How sexual content is defined:**

For purposes of this study, sexual content includes both *talk about sex* and depictions of *sexual behavior*. *Sexual behavior* includes depictions of sexual intercourse, scenes in which sexual intercourse is strongly implied (e.g., a couple kiss passionately and undress each other by the bed, the scene fades to black and cuts to the next morning with the couple naked under the sheets), intimate touching (e.g., a man runs his hands over a woman's breasts or thighs), passionate kissing, and physical flirting (e.g., a woman in a bar licks her lips provocatively and winks at a man). Only those scenes in which the sexual behavior was a substantial or primary emphasis of the scene were included in the study; any scenes in which there was sexual behavior but the emphasis on sex was minor or inconsequential were not included in the counts of sexual content. *Talk about sex* includes characters discussing their own or others' sexual actions or interests.

All scenes containing sexual content were analyzed for *any mention* of any issues concerning the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, including any reference to contraception, condoms, safer sex, sexually transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion, abstinence, or the possibility of waiting to have sex. *All such references were counted for this study, even if they were minor or inconsequential.* In addition, all shows with sexual content were also examined to determine whether the *entire program* contained a *primary emphasis* on any of these issues.

## **The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation**

The Kaiser Family Foundation, based in Menlo Park, California, is an independent national health care philanthropy and not associated with Kaiser Permanente or Kaiser Industries. This study was conducted as part of the Foundation's Program on the Entertainment Media & Public Health, which was established to examine the impact of entertainment media in society, and to work with entertainment industry leaders to help them convey important health messages to the public.



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