

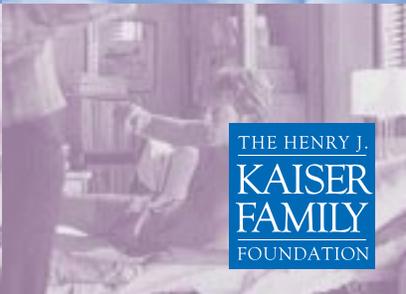
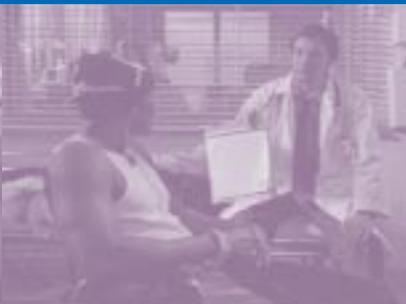


A Biennial Report of
the Kaiser Family
Foundation
2003



SEX DATE 3

Executive Summary





Introduction:

One of the toughest challenges of being a teenager in America today is making healthy choices about sex. In an era when the culture is saturated with sexual imagery and the news is full of sexual dangers, that challenge is perhaps greater than ever before.

Even in this modern era, young people continue to turn to such traditional resources as parents, schools, and health care providers to help them chart their course. But with media images permeating our society as never before, the messages teens see on television, billboards, movies, video games, magazines, music videos, and the Internet are also a critical part of their sexual socialization, offering cues about what's expected of them, how boys and girls relate, and what everyone else is doing behind closed doors.

Despite the plethora of new media that has become available, television continues to dominate young people's media diet, with teens watching about 3 hours every day. If you ask teens what role sex on TV plays in their own lives, nearly three out of four say it influences the sexual behaviors of kids their age, and one in four admits it influences their own behavior.

Many teens say TV plays a helpful role at least some of the time: more than half report that they have learned important information about sexual health from TV, and a similar proportion indicate they have gotten helpful ideas from sexual scenes on TV about how to talk to a partner about safer sex or how to say no to a sexual situation that makes them uncomfortable. TV can even help stimulate conversations between teens and their parents: a third say they have talked with a parent about a sexual issue because of something they saw on TV.

Given the high stakes involved, the kinds of messages teens receive about sex are vitally important. By the time they graduate from high school, two-thirds of teens are having sex. Half of all new HIV infections in this country occur among people under age 25. One in every four sexually active young people gets a sexually transmitted disease every year, and one in five sexually active teen girls gets pregnant.

As teens grapple with their sexual and social identities, they inevitably encounter stories on television that speak to these issues.

If television is an important source of information and potential influence about sex for young people, then obviously it is important to understand the nature and extent of sexual information being conveyed by television. The influence of media on social beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors tends to occur by a gradual, cumulative process from repeated exposure to common depictions. For that reason, identifying patterns in the portrayal of sex on television is the goal of this study.

Because *how* sex is portrayed is as important as *how much* sex is portrayed, the study goes beyond simply *counting* the amount of sex on TV and considers also the *context* in which sex is shown and the messages about sex that are portrayed. In particular, the research pays special attention to whether or not shows with sexual content include any reference to issues such as safer sex, waiting to have sex, or the possible consequences of sexual activity.

The research presented here is the third in an ongoing series of studies designed to track the nature and extent of sexual messages on television. This year's study covers the 2001–2002 television season and is based on an analysis of more than 1,100 randomly selected programs representing all genres other than daily newscasts, sports, and children's shows. Previous studies looked at programming from the 1997–98 and 1999–2000 TV seasons.

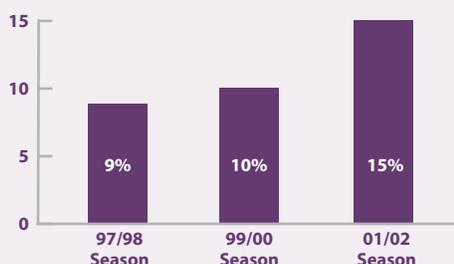
KEY FINDINGS:

1. Television today is doing a significantly better job of including safer sex messages in shows with sexual content than it has in recent years.

The study looked at shows with sexual content—ranging from talk about sex to kissing to intercourse—to determine how many included any reference to safer sex issues, such as contraception, waiting to have sex, or the consequences of sex. These references could range from a condom on a bedside table to an abstinence pledge, to a pregnancy scare.

- Today 15% of all shows with any sexual content include at least one scene with a safer sex reference. This is up from 10% two years ago and 9% four years ago.

Among all shows with sexual content, the percentage that also include safer sex references, over time



Although most of the references to these topics were relatively brief in nature (nearly two-thirds were judged “minor” or “inconsequential”) the fact that such references were included at all is an important development.

Given that comments about such issues may be either positive (e.g., “I never have sex without a condom”) or negative (e.g., “Condoms take the fun out of sex”), the study also explored that element of the depictions and found that just 12% of all references were negative.

Examples: Types of sexual content

Talk about sex:

Charlie, a college student, has become romantically involved with two women, Jen and Nora, at the same time. Jen shows up unexpectedly at Charlie's dorm room and asks him if he wants to “get naked.” Extremely nervous, he tries to beg off, and then all of a sudden Nora emerges from her hiding place in his closet. The two girls have just learned about each other, are angry, and demand an explanation. Charlie is apologetic, explaining that “I never meant to hurt either of you.” But

then Charlie decides to turn the situation to his advantage. He asks the two, “Can I make a suggestion? You and me, me and you, that's pretty much over. . . . We can't go back to the way things were. But, we can go forward.” Jen replies, “What does that mean?” Sitting between the two girls on his bed, Charlie puts his arms around each of them, saying first to Nora, “I like you,” and then to Jen, “I like you. And once upon a time you both liked me. So, I propose, tell me if I'm crazy or not, that we all like each other at the same time.” Jen and Nora look at each other in disgust at his suggestion of a threesome.

(*Dawson's Creek*, KTLA/WB)

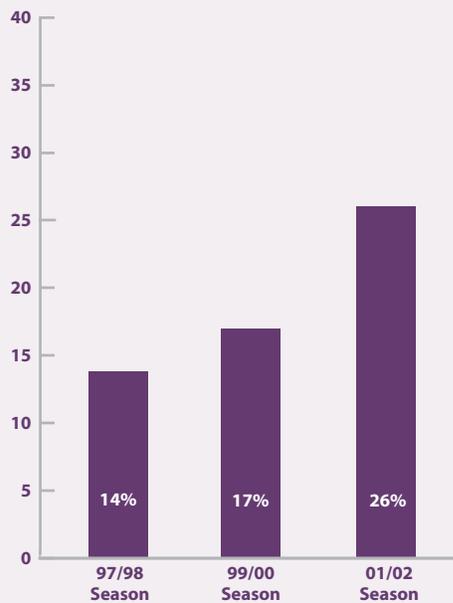
Physical flirting:

J.D., an inexperienced young doctor at the hospital, is checking on a rich and beautiful patient, Miss Sullivan, who also serves on the hospital board. Miss Sullivan emerges from the bathroom fully dressed, and the doctor asks why she isn't in her robe. She makes fun of him and comments sarcastically that she is going to a party. “I assume my tests are normal or else you wouldn't be chatting me up,” she says condescendingly. Fed up, J.D. becomes forceful with the woman. “I'm the doctor here, so put your gown back on, get back in bed, and shut the hell up!” Trying to appear perturbed, she remarks, “No one talks to me that way!” Glaring intensely at her, he barks, “Well get used to it,

Key Findings continued from page 1

- The rate of references to safer sex issues was even higher in those shows where it would be most appropriate; that is, shows that talk about or depict sexual intercourse. One out of every four shows (26%) with *intercourse-related content* includes at least one scene with a reference to a safer sex issue, up from 17% two years ago and 14% four years ago.

Among all shows with talk about or depictions of *sexual intercourse*, the percentage that also include safer sex references, over time



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Missy!" Aroused by J.D.'s forceful manner, the woman stares at him longingly and without a word begins to unbutton her blouse revealing her black lace bra. Responding nervously, J.D. stutters, "I didn't mean to be such a hardass just now. You can totally wait till I'm gone to put your gown back on." Taking control of the situation, she shuts the door to the room, smiles, and orders him to take off his pants. Ceding control back to her, all he can say is "Yes ma'am," as he drops his pants on the floor and the scene comes to a close.
(*Scrubs*, NBC)

Kissing:

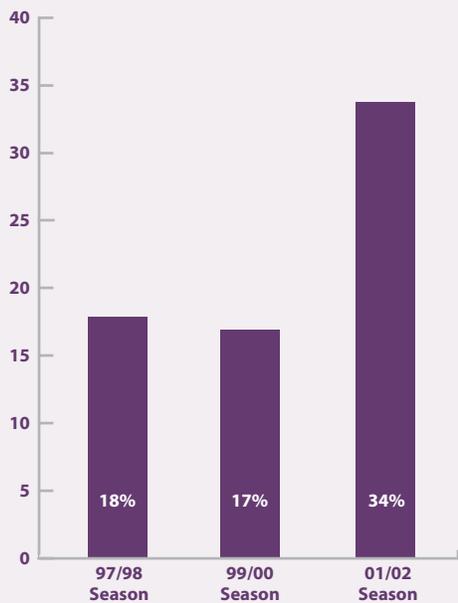
Baldwin, a police officer, and Valerie, a district attorney, have recently begun a romantic relationship. Valerie shows up at Baldwin's apartment and surprises him as he is coming out of the shower. He answers the door dressed only in a towel wrapped around his waist. Stepping inside, Valerie says, "It dawned on me that I have been really wrapped up with work too much, and I haven't let my hair down with you" as she unbuttons her blouse and tosses it on the floor. "And you were right yesterday when you said that we could use a little spontaneity," she continues as she unsnaps her skirt and throws it aside. Standing now directly

in front of Baldwin dressed only in her bra and panties, Valerie asks in a provocative tone, "Do you want to get spontaneous with me, Baldwin?" She pulls off the towel wrapped around his waist, and they embrace and kiss passionately.
(*NYPD Blue*, ABC)



- Among shows with sexual content involving *teen characters*, the rate is higher still: one in every three shows (34%) includes a safer sex reference, up from 17% two years ago and 18% four years ago.

Among all shows with sexual content involving *teen characters*, the percentage that also contain safer sex references, over time



Intimate touching:

In the midst of her televised concert, singer Janet Jackson announces, "It's getting kind of lonely up here. I think I need some company." After searching the crowd, she selects a young male adult from the audience who is led to the stage by a pair of the singer's bodyguards. Once there, the bodyguards strap the man into a restraining device that leaves him spread-eagled and facing the crowd, unable to move. The music to the next song then begins and Jackson sings a sexy ballad titled "Would You Mind." She sings, "I just wanna kiss you, suck you, taste you, ride you, feel you deep inside me," while stroking the man's thighs. Her

touching quickly escalates as she rubs her hand directly on the young man's crotch, with her fingernails glinting in the light of the close-up camera view. Facing the man with her back to the crowd, she straddles him and rubs her pelvis directly against his, then rotates around to face the crowd, crouches down, and rubs the back of her head and hair against the man's genitals. Finally, the restraining device is mechanically lowered to a horizontal position, and Jackson mounts her captive and simulates sexual intercourse with the man while stroking his chest and face.

(*Janet Jackson: In Concert from Hawaii*, HBO)

Sexual intercourse strongly implied:

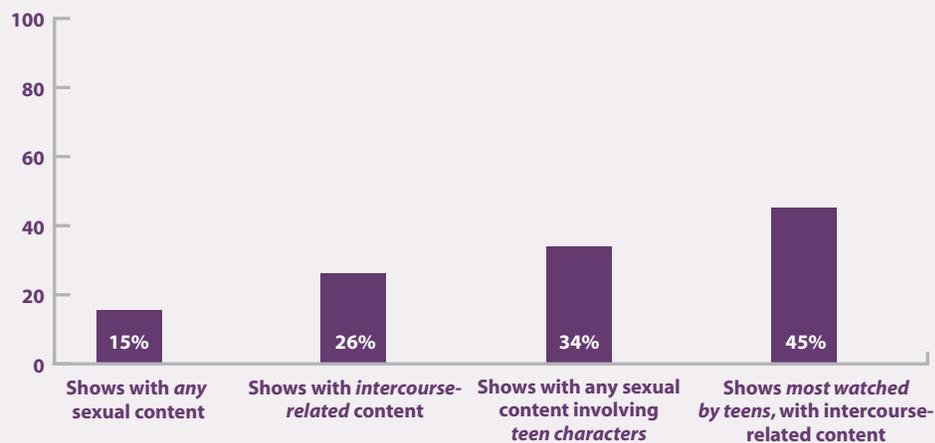
Faith Wardwell and her bosses at an ad agency are auditioning actors for a new advertisement. One actor in particular, Dan Murphy, catches Faith's eye and she stares at him, forgets her lines in the script, and tells him she is a big fan of his past work. Even her boss notices this flirtation, commenting that Faith had "eye sex" with Dan. Later, Faith happily volunteers to contact Dan at his apartment to tell him he got the job. As she stands in front of him at his apartment, Faith is clearly nervous until she finally asks Dan, "How bad would it be if I kissed you right now?" As Dan replies, "On a scale of 1 to 10... I have no idea," Faith moves in closer

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Key Findings continued from page 3

- Finally, looking just at the 20 shows most popular among *teen viewers*, those with talk about or depictions of intercourse made a reference to a safer sex issue nearly half the time (45%).

Among shows with sexual content, the percent that also include safer sex references, by program type, in 2001–02



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and the two kiss passionately. In the next scene, Faith is shown sitting on the edge of a couch bed frantically buttoning her blouse while Dan lounges behind her in his boxer shorts. Riddled with guilt, Faith exclaims, "I am getting married in nine days and I just had sex on a couch!" Dan replies humorously, "It was pulled out." Exasperated, Faith replies, "It still started as a couch. I am getting married you know, and I don't even know you." With her blouse buttoned incorrectly, Faith gathers her belongings, heads for the door, and tells Dan somberly, "This never happened."
(*Leap of Faith*, NBC)

Sexual intercourse depicted:

During a long Transpacific air flight, a 30-ish man and a younger adult woman seated next to one another become acquainted and begin to flirt with one another. Their banter escalates in short, cryptic scenes interspersed between cutaways to other elements of the plot. In the previous scene, the two seem to sense a chemistry but say nothing suggestive. Then a scene opens with the two of them together in an airplane bathroom, tightly embraced and kissing frantically, but visible only from the shoulders up. There are furtive movements in the cramped quarters and then the man

groans deeply. The couple break their embrace and pull back slightly from each other within the limited confines. As they adjust their clothes, the woman asks, "What's your name?" to which he replies, "Martin." She then offers, "I'm Mandy. Hey, maybe we can get together in L.A. or something." He shrugs her off with, "I'm gonna' be pretty busy" and leaves her behind in the bathroom without a glance back.
(24, Fox)

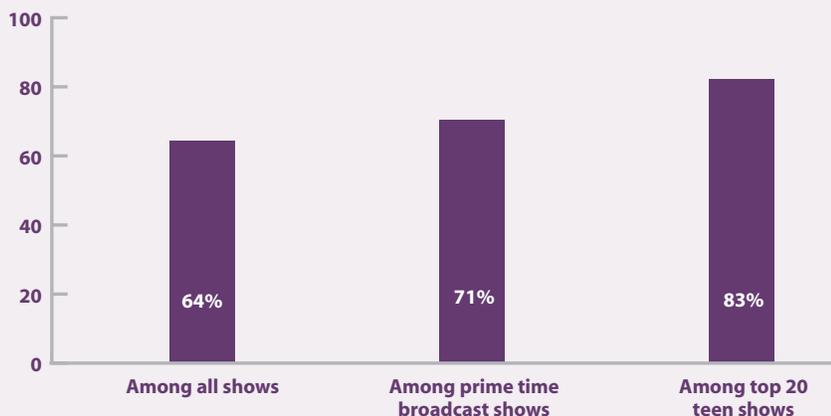
KEY FINDINGS:

2. The amount of sexual content on television remains high, especially in shows most watched by teens.

The study looked at a representative sample of more than 1,123 shows—covering the full range of TV genres other than daily newscasts, sports events, and children's shows—and identified the proportion of shows that included some kind of sexual content. Some of this sexual content is talk about sex (two friends talking about their love lives, or a couple talking about having sex) and some is sexual behaviors. The types of sexual behaviors measured in the study range from kissing to intimate touching to sexual intercourse, either depicted or strongly implied.

- Two-thirds (64%) of all shows include some sexual content; one-third (32%) of all shows have sexual behaviors, and one in seven (14%) have sexual intercourse.

Percentage of shows with sexual content, by type of show, in 2001–02



Examples: References to the possible risks or responsibilities of sex

Reference to abstinence:

Mackenzie (aka "Mack"), an older teenager, and her mother, Amanda, are talking about Mack's boyfriend, Billy. Mack has just had a discussion with Billy where she told him she wasn't ready to have sex with him yet. Mack tells her mother that everything was perfect before, but now

things "don't seem so perfect" anymore. At the time Mack told Billy, she explains, "He accepted it. He said he wanted to be with me no matter what." But Mack senses problems between them now, and wonders aloud if something is wrong with her because she doesn't feel ready to have sex. Amanda is supportive, and cautions Mack, "You're talking about taking a very big step, and only you can know in your heart what you're ready for. I mean, honey, it's entirely your choice. If there's something, anything, that you're not comfortable doing, don't do it!" (*The Young and the Restless*, CBS)

Reference to condoms:

It is prom night and two teenagers, Murray and Dionne, are planning to have sex for the first time following the event. Murray goes alone to the front desk of a lavish hotel to get a room. After he hands the clerk his money, Murray asks in a hushed voice, "Is there a place around here where I can buy some..." After Murray pauses, the clerk responds loudly, "Protection?" Embarrassed, Murray looks around to see if anyone nearby has heard the conversation. The desk clerk replies, "Ain't nothing to be ashamed of. These days you gotta be safe. I got a stash

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Key Findings continued from page 5

- In *prime time* on the top four broadcast networks, seven in ten (71%) shows have some sexual content.
- In the top 20 shows among *teen viewers*, more than eight in ten (83%) include some sexual content, including nearly half (49%) that have sexual behaviors, and one in five (20%) that have sexual intercourse. The top teen shows average 6.7 scenes per hour with sexual content. As noted above, while the teen shows are more likely to include sex, the ones with talk about or depictions of intercourse are also more likely to include a reference to safer sex issues, such as waiting to have sex, using protection, or the consequences of sex (45%).

Top 20 shows among teens in the 2001–02 season:

Malcolm in the Middle	Titus	CSI
The Simpsons	7th Heaven	WWF Entertainment
Bernie Mac	King of the Hill	Undeclared
Friends	Grounded for Life	That '80s Show
Greg the Bunny	That '70s Show	WWF Smackdown
Fear Factor	Wonderful World of Disney	Boston Public
Survivor	Andy Richter Controls the Universe	

Source: Nielsen broadcast and cable national audience estimates for the period 9/24/01 to 5/17/02 for 12-17 year-olds.

Trends over time:

- Today two-thirds of all shows (64%) contain *some sexual content*, a rate roughly similar to that found two years ago (68%), although still up markedly from that found four years ago (56%). Thirty-two percent of all shows include *sexual behaviors*, up from 27% two years ago and 23% four years ago.

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back here. Just a sec." While Murray waits for the clerk to return with some condoms, Reverend Mayo from his church walks up and greets Murray, asking if he is staying at the hotel. Murray tries to mask the situation, responding, "No, I lost my car keys and I'm just checking the desk." Just as he finishes, the clerk returns and announces loudly, "Found 'em." Reverend Mayo exclaims, "Ah, your prayers are answered," as the clerk inquires of Murray, "Do you want plain, fiesta-colored, or ribbed for her pleasure?"
(*Clueless*, KTLA/syndicated)

Reference to HIV/AIDS:

David Zachary, an aspiring rapper known as "Diamond Z," has been taken to the hospital after being beaten up in a brawl in a hip-hop club. Following treatment for his injuries, Diamond sits in a hospital room, joking cheerfully with his girlfriend, Ayesha. Dr. Carter enters the room and Ayesha leaves to get a root beer. "Your rapid HIV test came back," Dr. Carter intones, and then pauses somberly. Realizing the doctor is about to inform him that he is HIV-positive, Diamond shakes his head in disbelief, objecting, "Aww... no way. I come here with a bum back and you tellin' me I..." Dr. Carter shakes his head and interrupts, "I'm sorry." Diamond responds, "I don't do needles,

and I ain't no faggot." Carter holds up Diamond's chart and affirms, "You're positive." "How?" Diamond asks. "I don't know, but Ayesha should be tested, too," Carter says. "I told you, she's clean," says Diamond. Dr. Carter continues to stress the importance of telling Ayesha about his HIV status, but Diamond insists he won't tell her. "Diamond, it is really important that we find out how you contracted the virus," emphasizes Dr. Carter, as Ayesha opens the door. Putting on his fur coat, Diamond says, "This is messed up! We're outta here." He grabs Ayesha by the arm and drags her out of the room as Dr. Carter objects loudly.
(*ER*, NBC)

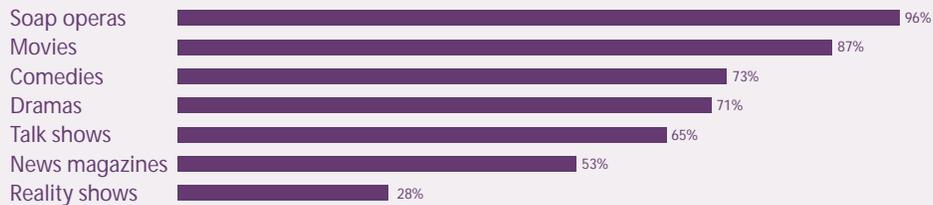


- The percentage of shows containing *sexual intercourse* has increased significantly in recent years: today, 14%, or one in every seven shows (again, this includes all genres other than daily newscasts, sports, and children's shows) has at least one scene in which intercourse is depicted or strongly implied, up from 10% two years ago and 7% four years ago.

Percentage of shows with sexual content, over time



Percentage of shows with sexual content, by genre



- Characters having sex on TV are more likely to be older and in established relationships.

Of all characters involved in intercourse, the proportion who are teens decreased from 9% to 3% over the past two years, and the proportion who are young adults decreased from 23% to 14% during the same period.

The proportion of characters involved in intercourse who had just met decreased from 16% to 7% over the past two years, while the proportion who are in established romantic relationships increased from 50% to 61% over the same period.

Conclusion:

Many factors shape the socialization process by which young people develop their beliefs and attitudes about sex, and ultimately their pattern of sexual behavior. One of those influences is television. As teens are grappling with questions such as “When should I start having sex?” and “What will my friends think of me if I do or don’t?,” they inevitably encounter stories on television that speak to these issues.

Television’s stories sometimes inspire, often inform, and consistently contribute to perceptions of how everyone else is handling similar situations. This study helps us understand what kinds of TV stories teens are likely to encounter, and the messages those stories are sending.

The effects of televised messages about sex are likely to be part of a slow and cumulative process. Because media influence tends to be gradual in nature, it is the overall pattern of messages across programs that is of primary interest.

Sexual messages continue to be a highly frequent element across the full range of programming examined by this research, with two out of three shows featuring some type of sexual content, a rate similar to that found two years ago. While the overall rate has remained roughly the same, more shows “go all the way:” one in every seven programs (14%) now includes a portrayal of sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied, up from the one in ten found two years ago and double the rate found during the 1997–98 season (7%, or one in fourteen shows).

From a public health perspective, the most positive finding from this year’s study is the substantial increase in the percentage of shows with sexual content that include at least one scene addressing the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, including topics such as waiting to have sex, practicing safer sex, or the consequences of sex. Today, 15% of all shows with

sex include at least one scene with such a reference, up from 9% four years ago and 10% two years ago.

Most importantly, there is a clear trend toward much greater attention to these topics within programs where they are most relevant—that is, in shows with talk about or depictions of sexual intercourse. One in four such shows in 2001–02 (26%) includes a safer sex reference, up from 17% two years ago and 14% four years ago.

A new analysis conducted on the shows most watched by teens found an even higher frequency of sexual content (83%), indicating that teens are likely watching more sex on television than other viewers. Among these top teen shows, nearly half (45%) of the programs with intercourse-related content also included at least one scene with a message about the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity. So while it would be difficult for teens to watch TV without seeing a lot of sex, they are also more likely than other viewers to encounter references to safer sex topics as well.

In the debate about sex on television, it may well be more important to consider how sex is shown rather than simply how much it is shown.

This study confirms that sexual messages are highly prevalent in the television landscape, especially in shows most watched by teens. Despite this prevalence of sexual content, it remains the case that only a small minority of all portrayals involving sex on television include any treatment of the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity (15%).

This relative lack of attention to responsibilities and consequences of sex misses an opportunity to help young people make more informed decisions about sex in their own lives. But the substantial increase in references to healthy sexual decision-making that has been observed in shows where these issues are most relevant—in 26% of all shows with intercourse-related content and 45% of the top teen shows with such content—is a promising indication of Hollywood’s progress in seizing that opportunity.



Methodology:

This study was conducted for the Kaiser Family Foundation by Professor Dale Kunkel of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and several colleagues working under his direction. The study was designed and analyzed by Professor Kunkel in consultation with Victoria Rideout, a vice president of the Kaiser Family Foundation.

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

This study was based on programming from the 2001–02 television season, which aired from October 2001 through March 2002. The study analyzed a total of 1,123 shows, covering the full range of TV genres other than daily newscasts, sports events, and children's shows. The main focus of the study was a sample of a composite week's worth of programming from each of 10 different channels. In addition, an "over-sample" of three week's worth of prime-time programming from the four major broadcast networks was analyzed and reported on separately. Finally, a sample of three episodes of each of the top 20 shows most watched by teens was also analyzed and reported on separately.

The 10 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 were *ABC*, *CBS*, *Fox*, *HBO*, *Lifetime*, *NBC*, *TNT*, *PBS*, *USA*, and the *WB affiliate* in Los Angeles, *KTLA*.

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 caresses

a woman's breasts or thighs), passionate kissing, and physical flirting (e.g., a woman in a bar runs her hands over her hips provocatively while licking her lips and winking 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, emotional consequences of 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.

“There is a clear trend toward much greater attention to safer sex topics—a promising indication of Hollywood’s progress in seizing the opportunity to help young people make more informed decisions about sex.”



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