

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Does TV glorify sex for teens?

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Q. The Parents Television Council has released a report in which it claims prime-time TV shows sexualize the young girls portrayed in them. The report is based on a content analysis of the most popular television shows for viewers aged 12-17 in the 2009-2010 season and states, "when underage female characters appear on screen more sexual content is depicted; the teen girls show next to no negative response to being sexualized; and more sexual incidents occur outside of any form of a committed relationship... [as a result] real teens are led to believe their sole value comes from their sexuality."

Among other things, the report found that underage female characters are shown participating in a higher percentage of sexual depictions compared to adults; that 93% of the sexual incidents involving underage female characters occurred within a context that qualified as "unhealthy"; and 75% of shows that included sexualized underage female characters were shows that did not have an "S" descriptor to warn parents about the sexual content.

Do you think young girls are presented in a sexual manner on television and movies? Should such content be toned down, or should parents take responsibility for that their kids watch?

Answer:

While I watch very little prime-time television, it is no surprise to me that studies show teen women are quite often sexualized in programs in which they appear. In fact, much of the media in our country, particularly advertising, sexualizes women of all ages in order to sell products or various types of entertainment.

However, we should not succumb to the pat answer of censoring television shows as a fix for the problem. Often, censoring books or films seems only to make them more popular, rather than less. I believe that we must instead look to parents and our faith communities to address the issue.

Given that, I am also aware that parents often seem to have great difficulty in talking with their teenage children, male or female, about sexual issues of any kind, and erroneously assume that they don't start thinking about such things until they are at least in high school. If parents expect to have any impact on the choices their children make, they must keep the lines of communication open from an early age and not be afraid to address difficult issues, including the implications of sexualization of young women.

But parents cannot be expected to do the job alone. They need the support of their faith communities, as well. It is for that reason that the Unitarian Universalist Associations, in conjunction with the United Church of Christ, developed a sexuality curriculum called Our Whole Lives in the late '90s. It is a multi-level, age-appropriate program spanning kindergarten through adults that emphasizes honoring our bodies and ourselves as sexual beings.

It is my hope and belief that the best way to combat the sexualization of young women in our media is through dialogue and education, not coercion. If young women are supported by their parents and their faith communities to see the negative effects of such messages, they can become aware of their own agency in protecting themselves from sexual exploitation.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford

Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills

I agree that it's disconcerting to see high-school girls in sexual situations on TV — not because that's not an accurate portrayal of real life, but because of the aging-up phenomenon. It's one thing for high-school girls to watch TV shows with adult sexuality and then act that out to be grown-up; it's another thing for the TV shows to portray high-school girls themselves as sexual — which means that middle-school girls are likely to act that out to be grown-up.

More disconcerting than that is the statistic that 93% of the sexual situations are unhealthy. It's one thing to model that sex is OK; it's another thing to model that demeaning, diminishing, soulless sex is OK — and never to show sex that is glad, loving and tender.

Yet more disconcerting is the implication that sex is the exclusive prerogative of the beautiful, cool kids; that only cheerleaders and handsome vampire boys get to enjoy sex. Surely that won't help the widespread suffering of American teenage girls struggling with body image, or boys searching for self-confidence.

All that said, it seems to me that we're actually coming into a better place with all this. I'm thinking of the movie "Juno," which was not about a 90-pound supermodel acting like a porn star, but a perfectly normal teenager having perfectly normal sex, then dealing with her pregnancy as best she could.

I've seen several TV shows that depict teenage couples as sexually active in safe, caring, responsible ways; and that also play out healthy conversations between those teens and their parents, with good guidance and support being given.

And of course, when all is said and done, upbringing has far more importance than the content of a TV show or movie. Kids raised to have a healthy self-image, reasonable self-confidence and overall decency and integrity dealing with others are not going to abandon all that just because they saw someone acting slutty on TV. Give them, and good parenting, a little more credit than that.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

Last Saturday's L.A. Times reported that "booth-babes" are returning to trade shows as the economy recovers, and pictured two young women in tarty nurse costumes advertising a health-tech firm. It is depressing to me as a woman and a mother of girls that sexualizing females (and sexism) is still common.

The report totally nails it, as far as sexual objectification of girls on TV aimed at young people is concerned. We are not a big TV-consuming household, but still I see enough to know.

Whatever their beliefs, of course parents must take responsibility for their kids' exposure to TV, both in content and in amount watched. I write this as a parent who happens to be an atheist.

I don't think, however, that it is necessary or desirable to separate young people entirely from their generation's popular culture, or that watching a little TV, even questionable fare, has to cause moral damage or misshapen values.

Since "we are the ocean and our kids are the fish," as a fellow parent said, we can make an environment that is pervaded with the good values we mean to transmit, in conversations, reading material, activities — every aspect of life.

This means watching "Gossip Girls" or whatever with your teen and pointing out how it falls short of your moral mark (and frequently fails the intelligence test, but that's another issue). Isn't that what the mute button is for, to talk it over during commercials? With DVR technology, being able to pause at any point for discussion is priceless.

They'd heard my opinions on everything so frequently that my darlings used to beat me to it and deliver critiques complete with mocking inflection and gestures.

With this week's question, "In Theory" participants received a link to the blog "Movie Mom" by Nell Minow. This name made me smile. In 1961 her father, Newton Minow, then chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, described commercial TV as a "vast wasteland." It still is a waste of time for the most part, with the media landscape even more vast. Parental guidance is essential.

Roberta Medford

Atheist, Montrose

WWJBD – What Would Jan Brady Do? Apparently more today than when "The Brady Bunch" ran in the '70s. Yes, television and movies are portraying young girls in an increasingly sexual way. That's how everybody is being portrayed in the media. And yes, that content — especially regarding teens and younger — should be toned down.

Our friends and neighbors in "the industry" are producing shows that influence how young people believe they should behave. Young folks, in addition to their already raging hormones and peer pressure, remember situations that the media present; and unless they are counseled otherwise, they tend to accept them as the norm.

Let's face it: That's what we all do. The persuasive power of product advertising in media proves this principle again and again.

And that's also why it's vital to teach our kids the basic principles of sexual morality as it is taught in God's word. Parents are the first line of defense for our kids against negative influences in our culture (and not just the media). We need to bring our kids up "in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4).

With media technology expanding almost daily, it's becoming more and more difficult to monitor and control what our kids are being exposed to. I would encourage us all, and especially our younger friends, to "let the word of Christ richly dwell within you..." (Colossians 3:16) and to "sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15). Christ in our hearts is the best defense against the bad influence that attacks us through our eyes.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church

Burbank

I would hope that it doesn't come as a surprise that both TV and the movies too often sexualize young females. The Parent Television Council report highlights what we already know.

Why do television and movie executives and producers do this? Sex sells, and young males and females are an attractive market for Hollywood and advertisers.

Should we speak out and ask that such portrays be toned down? Absolutely. But how successful can such campaigns be?

Typically, objections to such campaigns are made based on claims of censorship, limitations on art and Constitutional rights. As to the latter, the U.S. Second Circuit of Appeals recently vacated fines imposed by the FCC on ABC Television for nudity shown in ABC's airing of "NYPD Blue." More importantly, perhaps, is the vote of the viewing audience, which votes through ratings to tell executives and producers what to produce.

To me, the responsibility falls on parents to teach their children what is, and is not, appropriate as it pertains to television and movie viewing, and, for that matter, how to dress and act. Such actions cannot be dictatorial in nature. Rather, they must be done with love and understanding and helping children make informed and wise decisions. Ultimately, the decision will be theirs, so they need to be taught how to make wise decisions.

The LDS Church, through its youth programs, helps parents with this responsibility. These programs are designed to strengthen our youth through a foundation in Christ. They also provide standards that help our youth make wise decisions when they are confronted with choices, whether in the form of entertainment, dress, music, language or dating, to name a few. The choices are, and will be, theirs. The question is whether our youth are prepared to make them.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, La Cañada

Of course, parents should always monitor and try to be in control of what their kids watch — and it wouldn't hurt if parents would sometimes watch the shows their kids watch with their kids. But as far as young girls being sexualized, I haven't noticed. Perhaps I'm too old to notice.

However, what I do see is that just about every female face I see on the tube is a pretty one, and my guess is that the male performers don't have to be as nice looking as their female counterparts. With all the gains we've made in this country for the rights of women, and I'm guessing that we lead the world in the equality battle, it's still pretty hard to find a homely woman on television. So in a sense, our whole approach is "sexual," or possibly even "sexist."

A number of years ago there was a song called, "It's a Woman's World." In truth, it really isn't, and as a country, we still have some distance to go before we can say honestly, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men (and women) are created equal."

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

I think there is a dual responsibility when it comes to confronting this troubling trend. The prominent individuals and institutions that shape America's popular culture and social standards have an obligation to act in a responsible way. That means that our entertainment media must consider the consequences of consistently portraying young girls — and for that matter, any man, woman or child — in a less than respectful manner. At the same time, it is the distinct role of parents to keep a close eye on their children to ensure that they don't come into contact with any kind of physical, psychological or spiritual danger.

The unfortunate fact is that today, practically all forms of media are fraught with immoral and psychologically unsafe material. Various prime-time TV shows depict explicit violence, shocking sexual innuendo and other forms of indecent behavior as the norm — and of course, feature films can push the envelope even further. Video games are often focused on carnage, aggression and bloodshed. Many kinds of pop music denigrate women and glorify destructive behavior ranging from drug use to sexual promiscuity. And the Internet may be the most perilous medium of all, since explicit pornographic material and various other forms of human depravity literally are "just one click away."

Recently, mental-health professionals began to recognize that an entire generation has been raised on a variety of negative brain stimuli that may adversely affect them for the duration of their lives. They are now realizing that a young man who is frequently exposed to violence and pornography as a teenager will very likely have difficulties developing a normal relationship with a woman when it comes time to marry, settle down and have children of his own. And common sense tells us that any young person who is constantly bombarded by extreme images of sex and violence gradually will be desensitized to reality.

In my view, we must adopt a dual approach to address this problem. First, we must summon our ability to come together as a nation and take strong action against those in the media who fail to care about the welfare of society and our children. Second — and this is equally important — every individual parent and teacher must exercise the necessary oversight and discipline to ensure that the next generation of Americans will grow up healthy in mind, body and spirit.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

Anyone who has been watching TV and movies over time can see that cultural mores around acceptable portrayals of women in the media have changed dramatically. I suppose we allow these changes to sneak up on us. It took an early-90's Adbusters' MTV expose for me to see that music videos rarely showed an actual whole woman; instead we are always presented in parts (objects) so that the viewer is not challenged by a person, but titillated by an "object". MTV's primary purpose (in those days) was to sell music. TV shows that sexually objectify are also trying to sell us stuff.

So for all of us — not just parents — we get to choose: Shall we allow people who want to sell us stuff to shape our values? Or shall we find a different locus for the work of values-shaping?

Let's say you were to choose a faith community as a place for that work. In our church, you'd find that we seek to encourage our young women by identifying their spiritual gifts. You are a good listener. You are creative. You are compassionate. You have a heart for teaching. It is good, counter-cultural action. I know that many people think that churches are full of judgmental people just waiting to come down on young people who transgress 1950's rules of sexuality. But in our church — and in many churches I know — the goal of youth ministry is not to judge, but to present choices. You can pursue the path that the media lays out for you, which

involves a careless disregard for your body, soul and mind. Or you can make choices that nourish you in body, soul and mind. And by the way, the majority of us have made truly awesome mistakes. You'll find more empathy than you think among adults in a church.

If you are grounded in who you are as a child of God, TV isn't so dangerous, because it isn't shaping your expectations. It's just background noise to the authentic stuff that is really going on in your life.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

Is there any doubt that girls are sexualized in the media? If it isn't being done to them, they do it to themselves with the full approval of the adults that produce their music videos and promote their image. One wonders if this occurs because of the generally loose morals of Hollywood and the prurient sensibilities of show makers, or if it's all about giving kids what will certainly interest them at puberty to boost ratings. There's probably a combination, and money certainly leads the procession.

The difficulty for parents is the sheer inability of being there all the time as viewing monitors. Even if we're sitting there with our kids watching their programs, we have no assurances. Has anyone besides me been embarrassed and perturbed at something inappropriate that appears on a program we've generally come to trust? How about a fast-food commercial at the break, displaying a half-naked celebrity essentially making love to a burger? Who generally eats at those burger places?

Whether underage girls are depicted as having ravenous sex lives or adults are depicted the same in shows directed at teenagers, the result is the same. Kids are being indoctrinated with a nonstop sexual philosophy that says because sex is natural, it ought not have any boundaries. Is that the message we want for our kids? What happened to teaching them chastity and showing them something more honorable than what used to be referred to by the now politically incorrect term, slutty?

As a Christian, I can only convey what God has opined about such things, and he divinely commands us to keep our sexual natures in check (1Cor. 6:9-10) and to raise our kids properly (Proverbs 22:6). Kids should not be getting the message that fornication is a forgone conclusion of adolescence, as so many productions teach with vigor.

Perhaps with this recent study, more of us will be moved to action making our disdain for such "entertainment" known to advertisers and studios alike.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church
