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Guilty pleasure reconsidered

Television programs that show highly sexualized teens are viewed by largely adult audiences. What does that say about us?

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Some might call it a guilty pleasure. Grabbing a snack and heading to the couch to indulge in the latest TV teen drama. But the Parents Television Council (PTC), a US media watchdog advocating against sex, violence and profanity on TV, locked horns earlier this month with the CW Network. The Parents Television Council alleged that promos for the popular teen drama *Gossip Girl* depicted the teenage characters engaging in a threesome.[1] The PTC argued that such depictions were grossly irresponsible and would encourage teens to engage in risky sexual behaviour. The network went ahead and aired the episode (that just happened to coincide with a November ratings sweep) claiming the median age of their viewership is in their late twenties.

CW Network is likely right that this show and similar teen dramas draw adult audiences. That doesn't mean younger teens aren't watching. But what does that say about us adults? Isn't it just a little creepy that adults are making shows depicting teens having sex for adult viewers? Granted, most adults are watching for the drama and conflict, but viewer loyalty is backhandedly endorsing an overtly sexualized stereotype of teens.

A number of recent books and media reports have expressed concern over the sexualisation of children and young teens. A 2007 report by the American Psychological Association suggests that the sexualisation of girls, meaning imposing adult sexuality on children, leads to low self-esteem, depression and other mental and physical health risks.[2] Statistics Canada suggests that girls with a weak self concept at ages 12 and 13 are much more likely to be sexually active by ages 14 and 15 compared to those with a strong self-concept.[3]

The media is often accused of sexualizing children and teens. A study among undergraduate 18 to 22 year olds found that young women exposed to media clips depicting certain sexual stereotypes were more likely to endorse those attitudes than those who didn't view the clips. Regular viewing habits predicted students' attitudes and assumptions about sexual relationships.[4] If this was the effect on college students, what might the impact be on young teens?

If the media is guilty of sexually stereotyping young people, then many of the 'experts' are guilty legitimizing the notion. Or perhaps it's the other way around. Consider the rush to vaccinate nine-year-olds against STDs or the UN's recommendation that five-year-olds be taught how to sexual pleasure themselves. The urgency to promote children's sexuality in the name of education and health reveals a lot more about adults than children. Five year olds are hardly young Romeos.

It's true that very early sexual involvement is harmful.[5] Yes, many teens, particularly older teens like those depicted on television are having sex. But according to Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby, the number of sexually active teens today resembles the level of two decades ago.[6] Thankfully the rate of Canadian teens under the age of 15 who are having sex has been declining according to Statistics Canada, down from 12 per cent in 1996 to about 8 per cent 2005.[7] Bibby also reports that teen attitudes towards sex have in some ways become slightly more conservative over the last decade.[8] Just don't tell network executives.

If there is one place children and young teens should feel free from the overt sexual stereotype, it's at home. An Institute of Marriage and Family Canada analysis of Statistics Canada data suggests parents are the primary influence on teen sexual behaviour.[9] New research in December's *Journal of Early Adolescence* confirms that parental influence on grades and social behaviour remains stable throughout middle school.[10] Parents mistakenly assume that their influence fades as children age. The problem is that parents become passive, believing that peers and the media mute their voice.

It's up to parents to create a home environment where children feel safe and learn where their true value comes from. This requires setting standards and expectations with lots of listening and open communication. The hyper sexual teen stereotype is pervasive and inescapable. It's up to parents to identify it when they see it, and decide which voices are worthy to be heard in the family home.

For everyone else, perhaps it's time to reassess just how worthwhile the guilty pleasures really are.

Endnotes

1. Read the Parents Television Council press release here:
<http://www.parentstv.org/PTC/news/release/2009/1110.asp>
2. Zurbriggen, E.L. et al. (2007). Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls: Executive summary. Washington: American Psychological Association. Retrieved November 9th, 2009 from http://www.apa.org/pi/wpo/sexualization_report_summary.pdf
3. Garriguet, D. (2005, May). Early sexual intercourse. *Health Reports*, Ottawa: Statistics Canada, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 13. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/studies-etudes/82-003/archive/2005/7837-eng.pdf>
4. Ward, L.M. (2002). Does television exposure affect emerging adults' attitudes and assumptions about sexual relationships? Correlational and experimental confirmation. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, vol.31, no.1.
5. See Boyce, W.F. et al (2008). Characteristics of Canadian youth reporting a very early age of first sexual intercourse. *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality*, vol. 17, no. 3. This study suggests that sexual activity among teens under 15 years of age is often the result of intense social pressure, and commonly less than voluntary. See Rector, R.E. et al. (2003, June 23). The harmful effects of early sexual activity and multiple sexual partners among women: a book of charts. Washington DC: The Heritage Foundation. The study suggests the consequences of early teen sex extend into adulthood. This study, based on US government data of women age 15 to 44, compared outcomes from girls who initiate sex at age 13 and 14 and those who postponed sexual involvement until age 21. The study found girls who initiated sexual activity early were twice as likely to contract an STD, three times as likely to become a single mom, and less than half as likely to be in stable marriages by age 30.
6. Bibby, R.W. (2009). *The emerging millennials*. Lethbridge: Project Canada Books, p.51.
7. Rotermann, M. (2008, September). Trends in teen sexual behavior and condom use. *Health Reports*. Vol. 19, no. 3. Retrieved August 10, 2009 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-003-x/2008003/article/10664-eng.pdf>
8. Bibby, pp. 46-48.
9. Mitchell, P.J. (2009). Rated PG: How parental influence impacts teen sexual activity. Ottawa: Institute of Marriage and Family Canada. Available at http://www.imfcanada.org/article_files/IMFC%20OCTOBER_Final.pdf
10. Masten, C.L. et al. (2009) Relative importance of parents and peers. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, vol. 29, no.6.