

Preteens and sex: Turning TV into an ally

Our children are sexual beings growing up in a sexual world. Yet it can be scary for parents to recognize the sexuality of their children. Sex seems so risky with the appalling high rate of adolescent pregnancy and the terrifying threat of HIV infection and AIDS, not to mention our concern for our children's vulnerability to the emotional power of sexually intimate relationships.

We search for ways to shape our children's values and choices to protect them from the consequences of foolish decisions. Yet sometimes it feels as if the rest of the world is sabotaging our best efforts. And one of the most frequently accused saboteurs? The television!

There's no question that television is an important sexuality educator of our children. And no wonder. Sex in its most fundamental, primal sense is indeed what makes the world go round and the species survive. The surprise is not that we find sexual messages so present in media and society, but that we're surprised to find them there.

Rather than considering television an adversary in our efforts to educate our children, we can enlist it as an ally. Shows that present responsible adults making wise and thoughtful decisions in the expression of their sexual selves may be few and far between, but less ideal portrayals can also offer opportunities if we approach them creatively. And increasingly we can find innovative shows that confront, with unblushing honesty, the many

complex issues, including sexual ones, that adolescents face.

Preadolescents (9 to 12 year olds) live in a period of anticipation, characterized by the powerful physiological changes of puberty, intense sexual curiosity and fantasizing, and the tentative beginnings of intimate attachments to peers.

Seize the moment

To translate TV's sexuality messages into teachable moments to suite your preteen's developmental level, consider the following suggestions:

- Preteens have lots of concerns about body-image issues, clothing and hair styles, ethnic or racial differences in appearance. It can be fun to join your child on a TV tour of the fashions of the past few decades by comparing the look of stars in reruns of older shows with today's hottest trendsetters, a subtle way to demonstrate the fickle nature of the prevailing fashion demands.

- Emotions run high during these years, along with hormonal surges. TV offers a good opportunity to talk about how feelings are expressed and directed. Look for program scenes in which characters are obviously dishonest or deceptive in their communication with people they supposedly care about (a frequent story device). You might ask what it is that makes it so hard for the character to express feelings directly – fear of embarrassment, rejection or that it's just “not done.”

Making it Simple

Talking to your child about TV's every sexual message would require a degree of vigilance few adults possess. The following tips can help you pick your moment.

- Keep discussions informal and fun. Take a lesson from TV during commercial break, and deliver your own 30-second message to get some thinking started on what's being communicated.

- Address both positive and negative messages. Children can quickly build barriers against doom-saying adults. Transform the negative messages into positive moments by asking open-ended questions about your child's view of the issue rather than offering your description of what's wrong with it.

- Be selective about who's present. Some kids find it embarrassing to discuss sexuality with parents, especially if they have friends around.

- Express your opinions on the issues. Your children deserve to know your bottom line as the foundation for embarking on the struggle of determining their own views.

- Don't expect a sudden burst of insight. Just because you don't get a thoughtful response doesn't mean you haven't been heard. But if you regularly ask the provocative question or offer the insightful observation, you will nurture the critical thinking that will help our children question for themselves the messages implicit in the media.

Tuning in to TV sex

Most of television is like most of life: the sexual messages are always there but not always obvious or easily labeled. Look and listen for plots and scenes that address these basic sexuality issues. Then invite young viewers to step into a character's shoes and back out again and make comparisons to real life.

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When viewing TV with your children, look and listen, then express your own wondering. Sometimes it's more effective if you simply muse aloud. Direct questions put kids on the spot. Musings let them hear your values, and prompt conversations in a very nonthreatening way.



Turning your TV into a resource and a conversation starter can help you prepare your preteen for the transition into and through adolescence. The exercise will not only make more critical TV viewers out of your family, it can create a new open channel of communication that can enrich your relationship. Your children will hear about the topics they want to know more about, and you will have the chance to learn about their views and values while sharing your own in an immediate and meaningful way.

This article is excerpted from "Talking With TV: A Guide for Grown-ups and Kids," published by the Center for Population Options.

The Guide was created to help adults start conversations with preteens about relationships, values and sexuality. It includes information on research about the impact of TV on kids' attitudes and behavior, summaries of some TV programs popular with 9 to 12 year olds, information about how to contact producers of shows, etc.

The booklet is available, prepaid, from the Center of Population Options, Publications Department, 1012 14th Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20005. Single copies are \$3.00 each, 10 or more copies are \$1.80 each.

Getting Started

These questions can help you create springboards for discussion around issues of sexuality and sexual behavior.

Body Image

- **What do characters' appearances say about who they are and how they want to be viewed?**
- **How do the dress and mannerisms of TV stars affect the way children view themselves and present themselves to the world?**

Emotional expression

- **How do characters show their feelings for one another?**
- **Do they discuss feelings, or do characters expect others to be mindreaders?**

Families and Marriages

- **In what ways does the family portrayed resemble yours? How is it different? What is its configuration—single parent, stepsiblings?**
- **Who makes the decisions? How is respect demonstrated?**

Sex Roles

- **Are females allowed to be smart and accomplished?**
- **Are males allowed to be sensitive and loving?**
- **Can both males and females be strong, physically and emotionally?**

Behavior & Consequences

- **Do characters talk before they act on their sexual desires?**
- **Do they discuss the possible consequences of their actions?**

