

**Mitigating the Impacts of Sex and  
Sexuality in the Media on Children:  
Best Practices for Parents  
Literature Review**

*Prepared for the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute*

**March 2012**

# **Mitigating the Impacts of Sex and Sexuality in the Media on Children: Best Practices for Parents**

*A report by the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute  
March 2012*

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
1. Introduction .....	9
2. Children’s Exposure to Media .....	10
2.1 Television and Movies .....	10
2.2 Internet .....	12
2.3 Video Games .....	13
2.4 Print Media .....	13
2.5 Music and Music Videos .....	14
2.6 Advertising .....	14
3. Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media .....	15
3.1 Potential Positive Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media .....	16
3.1.1 Sexual Health Education .....	16
3.2 Potential Negative Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media .....	17
3.2.1 Gender Development .....	17
3.2.2 Stereotypes .....	18
3.2.3 Sexual Education and Development .....	18
3.2.4 Sexual Activity .....	18
3.2.5 Sexualization of Children .....	19
3.2.6 Self-Image .....	20
4. Best Practices for Parents .....	21
4.1 Communication .....	21
4.2 Media Literacy .....	22
4.3 Monitoring .....	23
4.4 Overall Recommendations for Media Habits .....	25
4.5 Rating Systems for Media Consumption .....	25
4.5.1 Film Classification and Guidelines for Saskatchewan .....	25
4.5.2 Canadian Television Classification System .....	27
4.5.3 Film Classification System for the United States .....	29
5. Conclusion .....	30
References .....	31

# **Executive Summary**

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this literature review is to 1) examine the effects of sexual content and depictions of sexuality in the media on children (up to 12 years old); and 2) to outline the best practices for parents to help mitigate the effects of sexual content in the media.

Due to recent technology, children's exposure to media has increased substantially. Children are exposed to various media sources and forms throughout the day (e.g., audio, print, screen). Sexual content is prevalent, even in children's media; as such, it is imperative that parents take steps to monitor their child's media usage and to take an active role in their sexual health education.

Media sources can serve to inform children about sexual health and sexuality; however, sexual content can also have negative effects on children's cognitive development and behaviour.

## **Children's Exposure to Media**

Children under the age of 2 years are recommended to have no exposure to entertainment media because of potential negative effects on their neurological development. Children over age 2 should be limited to less than 1 to 2 hours of entertainment media per day. Despite these guidelines, children spend much of their time using media in its various forms, and its use has increased over the past several years with an increase in availability and accessibility of media sources via cell phones, home computers, and the Internet.

Television and movies exert a predominant influence on children; many children watch television daily – up to 18.8 hours per week. Many Canadian children also have their own television in their rooms. Although television shows aimed at children may not contain explicit sexual content, they may still affect children's sexual development through the depiction of stereotypical gender roles, ideal body types, and unrealistic relationships. When television shows and movies do contain sexual content, they often do not contain important information for sexual health but rather present portrayals of sexual activity that inaccurately appear to be risk-free and misinformation about sexual activity and relationships.

The Internet is a relatively new technology and may be accessed with increasing ease via home computers and cell phones. Children may be more adept at using the Internet than their parents and therefore, it is important that parents are taking steps to monitor their children's Internet usage. Many children use the Internet daily and often have their own Internet connection. Although children may utilize the Internet to find out information on sexual health that they may be too embarrassed to talk to their parents or peers about, there is also a plethora of misinformation and sexual content on the Internet, which may have a negative effect.

Video games are another common media source used by children. Many children play video games daily using consoles, handheld video games, or cell phones. These video games often contain characters that epitomize stereotypical gender roles and also may contain sexually explicit content, despite ratings that are approved for children.

Print media such as magazines can often be a source of sexual health information; however, magazines may also promote negative body images and gender role stereotypes, which can have negative effects on children's body image and gender role construction.

Music and music videos are another source of sexual content for children and may contain a higher frequency of sexual content than other media sources. Gender stereotypes are frequent, and sexually explicit images are often used.

Advertising is also a potential source of sexual content in children's media. Advertising can be especially harmful as young children may not be able to readily discriminate between advertising (e.g., commercials), and the programming that they are watching. Sexual content is routinely used to sell products, and sexualized images of girls in magazines and on television can impact children's body image and body satisfaction.

## **Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media**

There are several hypotheses of how media sources exert their effects on children:

- Third-person effect: Children and their parents may believe that the media affects everyone except themselves and their families.
- Super-peer: The media may act as a 'super-peer' in that children may look at media sources for answers in the areas of sexual health and sexuality because it provides easy access, a wide range of confidentiality, and anonymity.
- Social learning theory: Children may believe the media to portray reality, and thus observations of situations in the media may influence children's behaviour in real life.
- Cultivation theory: Media content may affect children's beliefs about the world and subsequently, alter their behaviour. As such, gender role stereotypes found in the media can lead to children thinking that this is normal behaviour.

### **Potential Positive Effects**

#### ***Sexual Health Education:***

Sexual health education is important in a child's sexual development. Although children may not fully understand or actively access information related to sexual health and/or sexuality, it is still important to begin education early, and to help them understand the sexual content and information they may be exposed to via media sources.

Parents should play a pivotal role in dispensing sexual health information to their children. The media may be used as a tool to present this information in an age-appropriate manner, and can

help to stimulate children's learning about a topic and conversation that may be difficult for a parent to broach.

### **Potential Negative Effects**

#### ***Gender Development:***

Gender development occurs in childhood and may be influenced by media exposure, as children are still forming their values and beliefs regarding gender. The media often portray males and females in certain limited roles, which may promote gender stereotyping and affect children's gender development. For girls and women, the media put an emphasis on attractiveness and characters may be presented as timid, passive, and dependent. For men, the emphasis is put on being masculine in characters that are powerful, assertive, and dominant. Gender portrayals may also contribute to a child's choice of occupation (or belief that an occupation is gender appropriate) and may influence their behaviour through the actions of the characters.

#### ***Stereotypes:***

Stereotypes are preconceptions about a particular person or group of persons. There are many stereotypes that are present in the media, especially in advertising, and they can be especially harmful by promoting assumptions about particular groups of people. Media sources often create sexual stereotypes by promoting 'ideal' and 'normal' depictions of masculinity and femininity, which may lead to a higher value being placed on being traditionally masculine or feminine and lowered self-esteem or depression when children do not feel they fit into this mold.

#### ***Sexual Education and Development:***

As mentioned above, sexual education can help with a child's sexual development. Although the media provides possibilities to learn about different aspects of sexual health, it may also expose children to sexual content that is not developmentally appropriate, is incorrect, displays unrealistic portrayals of sexual activity, and/or ignores the potential risks of sexual activity.

#### ***Sexual Activity:***

The media can have an impact on sexual activity. Although children may not be engaging in sexual activity, the influence of media sources during childhood may have an impact on sexual behaviour during adolescence. Sexual content in the media often portrays unrealistic sexual activity that appears to be risk-free; frequent exposure to such content has been associated with:

- early or unplanned pregnancy
- early initiation of sexual intercourse and sexual activity
- casual sexual relationships
- intentions to have sex
- more positive attitudes towards casual, pre-, or extra-marital sex
- sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

***Sexualization of Children:***

The sexualization of children, especially girls, is widespread throughout different media sources and puts an emphasis on value coming from sexual appeal or appearance. This may have negative consequences on healthy sexual development, as well as lead to higher rates of depression, low self-esteem, and eating disorders.

***Self-Image:***

Sexual content in the media can also have an impact on self-image. Children may compare themselves to the 'ideal' characters present in the media and as a result, may feel the need to change their own bodies to fit in. Standards of beauty that are portrayed in the media are often unattainable for young boys and girls. For girls, a failure to achieve said beauty may lead to unhealthy behaviour (e.g., dieting, eating disorders) and decreased body satisfaction. For boys, pressures from the media to live up to masculine stereotypes of being muscular, powerful, and manly may lead to decreased body satisfaction and increased use of muscle-building techniques.

**Best Practices for Parents**

Parents play an important role in their child's sexual health education and development. They need to ensure that they are monitoring their children's media intake, and reducing exposure to sexual content as much as possible. This can be done in several ways, which are outlined below.

**Communication**

Parent-child communication is essential to countering the effects of sexual content in the media. Although sexual activity may only begin in adolescence, communication about sexual health and sexuality should begin in childhood and increase in developmental level as the child ages.

Sexual content in the media can be used as a way for parents to start conversations about sexual health and sexuality with their children and can also be a resource for parents who are looking for sexual health information for their children.

**Media Literacy**

Media literacy is a way to educate children about how media sources may influence them. Media literacy is vital to mitigating the impacts of sexual content in the media because children may not have the ability to distinguish media portrayals from reality, which may increase the influence that media has on them. Parents can help children to become media literate by discussing several aspects of the media:

- Media messages are constructed by a group of individuals who are trying to convey a certain idea.
- Each form of media uses a unique set of rules to construct messages.
- Messages in the media are only one possible representation of reality.
- People interpret media messages differently.
- Media outlets are used for profit and will do what they need to do to capture attention.

## **Monitoring**

Parents need to be active in monitoring their children's media consumption. It is important for parents to know what their child is watching and to provide guidance for what media their child is consuming. Monitoring of children's media includes both the parents' approval of the media source and its content (e.g., characters, message), as well as parents' critical discussion of the media source with their children. Parents should also monitor their own media usage to avoid situations where children may be present for more adult-appropriate content.

Parental rules about media use can have a positive impact on child behaviour and can make a difference in how the child interacts with the media. This may also help to increase the amount of time parents spend supervising their children's media activities.

Because technology is advancing rapidly, parents may not know what their children are accessing via media sources. This necessitates parents becoming familiar with the technology that their children are using so that they will be able to monitor it effectively.

In order to be most effective in monitoring children's media usage, it is not recommended for children to have televisions, other media consoles (e.g., video games, computers, cell phones), or Internet access in their bedrooms. The presence of media sources in the bedroom can increase media usage as well as increase the amount of sexual content that the child is exposed to.

## **Overall Recommendations**

- Start good media habits early.
- Self-regulation – parents should monitor their own media habits and change them if necessary.
- Balance – media use should be balanced with other activities (e.g., hobbies, physical activity, creative play).
- Keep media out of the child's bedroom.
- Take an active role in the child's media exposure.
- Variety – parents should encourage the child to sample a variety of media and guide them to make good media choices.
- Ratings – parents should learn about the various rating systems for different media sources, which can be helpful in choosing appropriate media for the child (several of these systems are outlined in the full version of this report).
- Communication – parents should talk to the child about content in the media and about being media literate.



## **Conclusion**

Children's exposure to sexual content in the media can have long-lasting impacts on the child's development. Sexual content is widespread, even in children's media. Parents need to be cognizant of this potential for exposure and should be active in mitigating the negative effects, such as lowered self-image, unhealthy sexual activity, unhealthy gender development, and misinformation about sexual activity and sexuality.

Parents can help their children to have healthy media habits by monitoring their media consumption and helping them to become media literate. They can also promote healthy sexual development in their children by communicating with their children about sexuality and sexual health in age-appropriate ways and by discussing any sexual content that is seen in the media.

# 1. Introduction

Media in its many forms is becoming an increasingly pervasive influence on society and particularly on its younger segments. Children and adolescents are surrounded by media in its various forms, including television, movies, Internet, music, and magazines. Media has wide-ranging effects on children's and adolescents' cognitive and behavioural development. The frequency of exposure to sexual content is of special concern, as it may affect a child's normal sexual development and impact other areas of growth as well (Strasburger, 2005). This report will focus on: 1) the effects of sexual content and sexuality in the media as it relates to children up to age twelve (brief mention will be made to the effects of sexual media on adolescents); and 2) best practices for parents to help mitigate the effects of sexual content in the media.

Media provide opportunities for learning, growth, communication and entertainment. With relatively recent increase and diversification of technology, children are exposed to media at a very young age (Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007). Media use by children has increased greatly as a result, although it may vary by media type (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The content of such media can affect children both positively and negatively, and media's influence is directly related to the amount of exposure the child has had (Media Awareness Network, 2000; 2001). In general, time spent using media displaces other possible activities that a child could be doing (e.g., physical activity, reading, socializing) (Strasburger, Jordan & Donnerstein, 2010), which may be negative; however, positive media content may be used for children's education, both academic, social, and sexual, and may be more effective than other methods in promoting learning. This may be contrasted with the negative media content that is prevalent in children's exposures to the media. Mass media producers are not often concerned with the outcome of their media output, especially in the realm of sexual health (Ballam & Granello, 2011). This may lead to inappropriate information being transmitted.

The media is a source of both sexual content and sexual information. Children, willingly or not, receive education from media sources such as television shows, commercials, magazines, and the Internet. This is especially true of information on sexual health and sexuality, where sexual health involves "a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being in relation to sexuality" and sexuality denotes "sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy, and reproduction" (PHAC, 2008, p.5). In the past, parents and the educational system have been the primary sexual health educators for children; however, the mass media is becoming a more popular choice for sexual health education (Strasburger, 2005). Information in the media may not be developmentally appropriate for children and may also contradict information that the child receives from school or parental sources. This can be confusing for children, and they may be more likely to act on the messages they receive from the media about normal sexual behaviour than they are to act on messages they receive from sources such as family, peers,

churches, or schools because of the methods of influence of the media, as well as its pervasiveness in the child's life (L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006) (see *Section 3: Effects of Sex & Sexuality in the Media*). Children's cognitive capacities at different stages will determine if and how they understand sexual content in the media (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2010).

It is important for parents to be involved in their child's development, especially when it comes to their knowledge about sexual health and sexuality. Parents can be assets to their children as sexual health educators, and this begins with communication (Ballam & Granello, 2011). With the use of new technologies, parents may be unaware of how to combat the combined influences of sexual material across various media (Potter & Potter, 2001). Best practices for parents will be identified and examined in order to help reduce the impacts that sexual content and depictions of sexuality in the media have on their children.

## **2. Children's Exposure to Media**

Most children are exposed to the media in various forms every day. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2011) recommends that children under the age of 2 years should have no exposure to entertainment media. The brain is still developing in children of this age group, and children need stimuli in order to improve neurological abilities. These stimuli may include interaction with parents and other humans, manipulation of environmental elements (e.g., blocks, sand), and creative, problem-solving activities. Because entertainment media, even educational videos aimed at young children, does not perform any of these functions, it is not recommended during this time period (Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF, 2005). Children over age 2 should be exposed to less than 1 to 2 hours of entertainment media per day (AAP, 2011). To be beneficial, children need to understand the content of programming and pay attention to it; research has shown that watching even educational programming that is potentially educational for older children, such as Sesame Street, can have a negative effect on language for children younger than 2 years (Linebarger & Walker, 2005).

Despite these guidelines, children spend much of their time with entertainment media, and use of media has increased over the past 10 years for 8- to 18-year-olds (with the exception of reading): 24 minutes per day for video games, 27 minutes per day for computers, 38 minutes per day for television, and 47 minutes per day for music (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). The frequency of children's usage for different types of media will be discussed below.

### **2.1 Television and Movies**

Television and movies remain a predominant influence on children, despite the influx of newer technologies (Strasburger, 2006). Many children watch television daily (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2003); preschoolers (2 to 6 years) and older children (7 to 12

years) both spend approximately 18.8 hours per week watching television (The Centre for Youth and Media Studies, 2010). Almost half of 8- to 15-year old Canadian children have their own televisions (Canadian Teacher's Foundation, 2003). Research has shown that this high-frequency usage of media may hold true even of younger children; in a study of over 1000 parents of children aged 6 months to 6 years, nearly 75% of children watched more than an hour of television a day, 74% of children under age 2 have watched television, and 59% of these children watch television on a typical day for an average of 2 hours and 5 minutes (Rideout, Vandewater & Wartella, 2003). One study showed that even 9-month-old infants may regularly watch television (Zimmerman, Christakis, & Meltzoff, 2007).

Although television shows for young children may not contain explicit sexual content, they still have the ability to impact children's sexual development, especially due to repeated exposure over time. For example, television often depicts stereotypical gender roles; 'desirable' body types; and unrealistic relationships (Ward, 2002). These messages have a lasting impact on children's sexual development and behaviour.

As children age, they may also access movies and television programs that are meant for older viewers, as parents are more likely to be permissive of the child independently choosing programming as they age, or may not monitor their child's media intake as carefully. For example, parents of elementary school students were more likely to let their children watch violent content as compared to parents of toddlers (Hust, Wong, & Chen, 2011). These media sources may contain sexual information that is not developmentally appropriate, and may be confusing to the child (for more information, see *Section 3.2.3: Sexual Education and Development*).

Television programming and movies that contain sexual material often do not depict healthy aspects of sexuality or sexual activity but instead present portrayals of sexual activity that do not depict the potential risks involved (Brown & Keller, 2000). Important information related to sexual health is often left out, including when it is appropriate to have sex or engage in sexual activities, how to properly protect one's self from pregnancy and STIs, flexibility in gender roles, accurate depictions of what it means to be a man or woman, and having a healthy body image (Strasburger, 2005). A content analysis of teenagers' favourite primetime programs showed that only about 1 in 11 television programs that contain sexual content mention possible risks or responsibilities (e.g., STIs or unintended pregnancies) (Cope & Kunkel, 2001). Strasburger (2005) notes the following sexual themes are present in entertainment media:

- Sexual activity just happens.
- There is no time to prepare to have sexual activity.
- Being swept away is the natural way to have sex or engage in sexual activity.

- Adults do not use contraception.
- Adults do not plan for sexual activity.
- Everyone is having sex or engaging in sexual activity.
- Married people frequently cheat on each other.
- Sexual activity or intercourse is a recreational sport.
- Sexual activity has no consequences.

Because of the high frequency of children's use of television, and the high exposure to sexual content in television programs and movies, it is likely that the depictions of sex, sexuality, and relationships can impact developing children, both behaviourally and cognitively. In the 2001–2002 television seasons, more than 75% of all primetime shows contained sexual content; popular shows aimed at teenagers contained more sexual content than other adult primetime shows, and 1 in 10 shows contained a portrayal of sexual intercourse or implied intercourse (Kunkel, Eyal, Finnerty, Biely, & Donnerstein, 2005).

'Family hour' is the period between 8:00 and 9:00 PM when primetime television is more family-focused than later programming hours when children are likely to be asleep (Center for Parent/Youth Understanding, 2001). In a content analysis of the 2006-2007 season, over half of the programs during family hour contained sexual content, and there was an increase of 22.1% of sexual content since the 2000-2001 television season (Parents Television Council, 2007).

## **2.2 Internet**

Internet is a relatively new technology and may be accessed with increased ease via phones or computers at home or at school. Although younger children may not have the access or ability to easily use the Internet, older children may often be more proficient at navigating the Internet than their parents. In 1999, fewer than half of children aged 8 to 18 years had used a computer the previous day; this figure rose to 54% by 2004 (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). The same study showed that both frequency and length of usage had also increased; usage had more than doubled from 27 minutes per day to over an hour (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005). Access to the Internet is almost universal. In 2005, up to 94% of young people said they can go online from home, as compared from 79% in 2001 (Media Awareness Network, 2005). Many children have their own computers and Internet connection. The Media Awareness Network (2005) notes that 20% of Canadian Grade 4 students access the Internet through their own personal computer, and this increases to 51% by Grade 11. Many students also have access to the Internet via their cellular phones. This makes Internet searches virtually free from parental monitoring and/or comments (Ward, 2002) and can have a potentially negative effect on child development. The Internet may also contain

misinformation on sexual health and sexuality and may provide easy access to explicit sexual content (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006).

Conversely, children may use the Internet to find out information that they are too embarrassed or shy to talk about with parents, siblings, or peers. This can have a positive effect on sexual health and sexual education. However, although children may intend to use the Internet to find accurate, helpful, and age-appropriate sexual health information, there may be difficulties in finding reliable information and children may receive inaccurate sexual health information as a result.

The Internet is also a potential source of pornographic content. Children may access this content intentionally or accidentally, with up to 75% of adolescents reporting having stumbled onto pornography online (Taylor & Hanson, 2007). There is a potential for long-lasting effects on the child's cognitive and behavioural development.

### **2.3 Video Games**

Video game usage is common in children, whether online, via cell phone, or using a game console or computer. There has been an increase over the past several years in cell phone and handheld video game use among 8- to 18-year-olds (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). In a typical day, this population spends over an hour playing video games, and 47% play every day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010). Up to one-half of children have a video game console in their bedroom (Strasburger, 2006). Video games, even those used commonly by children, often contain sexual content and violence.

Video games are often very stereotypical in their portrayal of gender roles and may contain sexually explicit content. Male characters are more likely to engage in physical aggression, while female characters are severely under-represented (only 16% of all characters); and often wear revealing clothing, and/or have a nurturing role (Children Now, 2001). The portrayals of gender in video games may contribute to girls' self-images, as well as boys' expectations towards females in the future (Children Now, 2001).

Parents need to ensure that they are previewing content of video games. Existing rating systems are not necessarily indicative of appropriateness, as over three-quarters of video games rated 'E' (for 'Everyone') contained violence and only one-third contained body diversity (e.g., a range in body types). These video games also often lack gender diversity and promote gender stereotypes (Children Now, 2001).

### **2.4 Print Media**

Print media, specifically magazines, may have both positive and negative effects on a child's sexual development. Positively, magazines may provide access to developmentally appropriate information for boys and girls. Many magazines that are

targeted towards children and teens may provide sexual health information in an age-appropriate fashion, including information about contraceptives, STIs, sexual decision-making, virginity, sexual dysfunction, sexual attraction, sex acts and techniques (Brown, Steele, & Walsh-Childers, 2002).

However, magazines may promote negative body images and gender role stereotypes. Sexualization and objectification of children, especially girls, is common and can have negative outcomes on self-esteem, body image, and gender construction. Fashion magazines may be more stereotypical than other types of print media. Lindner (2004) found that the advertisements in fashion magazines depicted women in more stereotypical ways than news magazines. As well, Malkin, Wornian, & Chrisler (1999) found that men's magazines did not refer to body appearance on the cover while 78% of the women's magazine covers did. The potential effects of this content will be discussed further in *Section 3.2: Potential Negative Effects of the Media on Children*.

## **2.5 Music and Music Videos**

Music targeted at young children may not contain sexual content; however, as children grow older and start to listen on the radio to mainstream music or music that is aimed at teenagers and adults, or are exposed to this music via parents, older siblings, or peers, this music may contain explicit sexual lyrics that are not appropriate for children (AAP, 2001). Music and music videos may contain a higher frequency of sexual content such as sexually explicit images and lyrics than other media sources (Pardun, L'Engle, & Brown, 2005; Potter, 1998).

Gender stereotypes are common in this genre. Females are often viewed as sexual objects (Arnett, 2002; ter Bogt, Engels, Bogers, & Kloosterman, 2010; Wallis, 2011) and often appear in sexualized clothing such as leather or lingerie (Weinstein, 2000). A content analysis of music videos showed that men appeared twice as often as women and were depicted as more dominant and aggressive, whereas the women in the videos were depicted as more sexual and subservient (Sommers-Flanagan, Sommers-Flanagan, & Davis, 1993).

## **2.6 Advertising**

Advertisements are used in a variety of media settings and are widespread in children's media. Children may view more than 40,000 commercials every year, many of them aimed directly at children (APA Task Force on Advertising and Children, 2004). Gender roles in the media, including advertising, will be discussed further in *Section 3.2.1: Gender Development*.

Sexual content is routinely used by media sources as a way to sell products. This is also true of children's advertising. There is much sexual imagery in advertising, including the inappropriate early sexualization of children, particularly girls. Girls may be objectified in

advertising and portrayed in provocative poses (AAP, 2001). Females are more likely than males to be physically attractive, thin and partially clothed in advertising and in television as a whole (Lin, 1998; Ward, 2002). This may promote an ideal of attractiveness. Young girls and boys see sexualized images of girls in magazines, which may affect their views of body image and sexuality. Sexualized images in advertising also increase sexual content exposure in general, which can have negative effects on developing children. These potential effects will be discussed below (*Section 3.2.5: Sexualization of Children*).

Advertising may affect children differently than programming does, as it requires a child to be able to distinguish between two different formats (e.g., commercial vs. non-commercial content) and thus requires a higher level of cognitive development. Children below the ages of 4-5 years cannot consistently make this distinction; therefore, children under this age may just see commercials as a continuation of the programming (APA Task Force on Advertising and Children, 2004). Children must also be able to recognize the potential persuasive messages involved in advertising; this cognitive development does not occur until at least age 7 to 8 years (APA Task Force on Advertising and Children, 2004).

### **3. Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media**

Exposure to sexual content and sexuality in the media may have many effects on children's cognitive and behavioural development. Sexual content does not necessarily have a negative impact on children (e.g., education and information purposes), but it has been associated with several adverse consequences. These will be discussed below.

Media exposure may affect children via several methods. Firstly, the 'third-person effect' notes that children may believe that media affects everyone except them (Strasburger, 2004). The same is true of parents, in that they believe that the media affects everyone except themselves and their families. This may lead to children and their parents allowing themselves to be exposed to media that is developmentally inappropriate and that may have harmful effects.

Secondly, media may act as a 'super-peer' (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). Children might look to the media for answers regarding sexual health and sexuality because it is easy to access, provides information on a wide variety of topics, and allows them to find answers to questions without having to consult peers or adults and risk embarrassment (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). This is especially true for early maturing girls who may not have peers who they can talk to about body development, sexual health, or sexuality (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005). As well, because the media often portrays unrealistic and unhealthy sexual situations, children may then act inappropriately based on this information



because they see media (in particular, television) as approving of youth engaging in sexual activities (Brown, Halpern, & L'Engle, 2005).

Thirdly, children may learn from the media and believe it to be the 'real world'. Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1986) notes that children learn behaviour through observation of others; this learning can occur directly through real life interactions or indirectly through the media. This can lead to unhealthy sexual behaviour as the media tends to over-emphasize the potential benefits of sexual activity without portraying the potential risks. This may lead children to believe that sexual behaviour is without risk (Chandra et al., 2008).

Fourthly, cultivation theory suggests that media content affects viewers' beliefs about the world and consequently alters their behaviour (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli, & Shanahan, 2002). In this way, the gender-stereotyped characters in the media reinforce traditional masculine and feminine roles, which may affect children's behaviours. For example, with more exposure to body ideals found in the media, children may begin to believe that these body types are normal (Gerbner et al., 2002).

### **3.1 Potential Positive Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media**

#### **3.1.1 Sexual Health Education**

The media has the potential to play an important role in providing children with sexual health information. Sexual health education is a life-long process where attitudes, beliefs, and values about identity, relationships and intimacy are formed (Shields, 1993). Although younger children may not understand or actively access information related to sexual health and/or sexuality, they may still be influenced by the media's messages. Older children may begin to have questions about their own sexual development and thus may actively look for answers in the media; they may also be influenced unknowingly by information and representations of sex and sexuality in the media, especially if they access media that is meant for older viewers.

The media may be used as a tool to present age-appropriate information to children on sexual health and sexuality. There is a need to give information that is based on the developmental level of the child. Parents can play a pivotal role in dispensing information; however, if the parent is not providing the child with information, or there are barriers to communication (e.g., shyness or embarrassment), the media can be used to find the necessary information (Ballam & Granello, 2011).

Media can add to development if it stimulates children's learning. Studies have shown that children can learn from the media, even at young ages. Educational programming has been effective in enhancing vocabulary development (Rice, Huston, Truglio, & Wright, 1990), improving problem-solving skills (Anderson et

al., 2000) and increasing school readiness (Wright et al., 2001). It is likely that information on sexual health and sexuality can also be learned in this way, if it is presented at the appropriate developmental stage and in the appropriate manner.

### **3.2 Potential Negative Effects of Sex and Sexuality in the Media**

#### **3.2.1 Gender Development**

The process of gender development occurs in childhood and may be influenced by exposure to media. Children are still forming their values and beliefs and are more vulnerable to many types of images or stereotypes that may be presented to them, especially from media sources that provide both audio and visual reinforcement (Davis, 2003). Children become aware of gender roles early in life (Kahlenberg & Hein, 2010). The media can help to shape gender roles through its portrayal of girls and boys, and men and women.

There are distinct differences in the ways that women and men are portrayed in the media (Davis, 2003). The media offers 'scripts' of how boys and girls should act, which may promote gender stereotyping (Ward, 2002) and help to teach children society's definitions and expectations for men and women (Paek, Nelson, & Vilela, 2011). For girls and women, the emphasis is on attractiveness; these characters may be presented as timid, passive and dependent. For men, the emphasis is on being powerful, assertive and dominant (Paek, Nelson, & Vilela, 2011).

In addition to gender development, the media's portrayal of gender also contributes to gender role formation. There has been a relatively recent shift in women's roles in television and movies. Until the last twenty years, female characters were portrayed almost exclusively in traditionally female occupations (Ferrante, Haynes, & Kingsley, 1988), mainly inside the home as housewives or mothers. If they did work outside of the home, they were powerless and performed menial tasks and were thought of as acting role-inappropriately. Currently, it is acceptable for women to undertake a variety of careers and positions, but both male and female characters continue to be portrayed in stereotypical ways, especially in children's media. Although there is less of a divide between male and female roles, a content analysis of children's cartoons revealed that male characters were more aggressive than female characters, and female characters were more polite, more romantic, and more fearful than male characters (Leaper, Breed, Hoffman, & Perlman, 2002).

### **3.2.2 Stereotypes**

Stereotypes are preconceptions about a particular person or group of persons. Stereotypes in the media are widespread, especially in advertising. Stereotypes act to give the audience quick information about a character, usually relating to their class, ethnicity or race, gender, sexual orientation, social role or occupation. These are potentially harmful in that they can promote assumptions about particular groups of people and reduce individual uniqueness to simplistic categories.

The media often creates sexual stereotypes by promoting 'ideal' and 'normal' depictions of masculinity and femininity. Combined with the level of sexualization of girls in the media, this may lead to a sexual stereotype of women being sexual objects, and a high value being placed on attractiveness (Ward, 2002; APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). Girls who are exposed to more mainstream media content have stronger values placed on such sexual stereotypes (Ward, 2002), which denotes an association between exposure to sexual content in the media and stereotyping. (Sexualization will be discussed further in *Section 3.2.4: Sexualization of Children*).

Gender stereotypes are also widespread in the media. Gender stereotyping has been associated with assigning males and females to traditional work roles (Gadassi & Gati, 2009) and self-objectification of girls and women that, in turn, results in lowered self-esteem and higher rates of depression (Aubrey, 2006).

### **3.2.3 Sexual Education and Development**

Sexual health education is an important and normal part of development. The media provides possibilities for children to learn about different aspects of sexual health (as discussed in *Section 3.1.1 Sexual Health Education* above). Healthy views of sexuality are related to greater intimacy in marriage, higher self-esteem, lower levels of stress, and personal happiness (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007). The issue comes when children are exposed to sexual content that is not developmentally appropriate, is incorrect, displays unrealistic portrayals of sex, and/or ignores the potential risks of sexual activity (Arnett, 2000). Parents need to ensure that their children are not being exposed to media that portrays sexual information in ways that their child is not ready for, and they should also make sure that they are continually communicating with their child about sex and sexuality.

### **3.2.4 Sexual Activity**

The media has been shown to impact sexual activity. Although children themselves may not be engaging in sex or sexual behaviour, the influences of media during childhood and leading up to adolescence may impact sexual

behaviour later in life. Sexual content in the media often portrays unrealistic relationships and unsafe sexual activity, and although there are often emotional consequences (e.g., guilt, disappointment), there is rarely mention of physical consequences of sexual activity. The risks and responsibilities of sexual activity, such as pregnancy, STIs, and condom or contraceptive use, occur in only 10% to 15% of programs containing sexual content (Kunkel et al., 2003).

Frequent exposure to sexual content in the media has been associated with:

- early pregnancy (before age 20) (Chandra et al., 2008)
- unplanned pregnancy (Chandra et al., 2008)
- earlier initiation of sexual intercourse and other sexual behaviour (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2008; Collins et al., 2004)
- casual sexual relationships (Ward, 2002)
- intentions to have sex (L'Engle, Brown, & Kenneavy, 2006)
- more positive attitudes towards casual, pre-, or extramarital sex (Ward, 2002)
- STIs (Wingood et al., 2001)

### **3.2.5 Sexualization of Children**

The sexualization of girls is widespread throughout different entertainment media. Sexualization is different than a portrayal of healthy sexuality in that it can lead to the following (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007):

- A person's value comes only from his or her sexual appeal or behaviour, to the exclusion of other characteristics.
- A person is held to a standard that equates physical attractiveness (narrowly defined) with being sexy.
- A person is sexually objectified (i.e., made into a thing for another's sexual use) rather than seen as a person with the capacity for independent action and decision making.
- Sexuality is inappropriately imposed upon a person.

Much of the research focus has been on the sexualization of girls in the media. Sexualization is widespread throughout children's and adolescents' media. This sexualization in advertising and programming across media sources may lead to negative consequences (APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls, 2007):

- eating disorders
- low self-esteem
- depression
- difficulty developing healthy sexuality

### 3.2.6 Self-Image

Sexual and sexualized content in the media can have long-lasting impacts on the health of children. Children, both boys and girls, are very sensitive to how others view them. When comparing themselves to 'ideal' characters from the media, they may feel the need to change their own bodies to fit in or to look more like the figures they see on television or in movies. These negative influences may come from different types of media including television characters, fashion magazines, and music videos.

Standards of beauty that are perpetuated in the media are often unattainable for young girls and boys. Despite recent developments in terms of gender roles in the media, women are still expected to be attractive (Barriga, Shapiro, & Jhaveri, 2009). The media puts pressure on children to be sexually attractive, particularly through character depictions in video games and movies, and on television. This is especially true for girls. In a content analysis of the 1999 – 2000 primetime season, approximately twice as many comments were made by TV characters about how female characters looked than about how male characters looked (Lauzen & Dozier, 2002). Downs and Smith (2005) noted that females were likely to be presented in a hyper-sexualized way, with partial nudity, unrealistic bodies, and sexually revealing clothing; a study by Mou and Peng (2009) found similar results. Women are often objectified in the media, and this trend can impact young girls' views of their bodies and what it means to be attractive (Media Awareness Network, 2010).

The desire to look 'sexy' or like sexualized figures from the media can lead to unhealthy behaviours such as dieting, eating disorders and poor body image. The American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls (2007) noted that premature exposure to sexually explicit material in the media puts children at an increased risk of eating disorders and poor body image. A study looking at preadolescent girls found that girls who watched television shows with an appearance emphasis were less satisfied with their appearance (increased body dissatisfaction) (Dohnt & Tiggemann, 2006).

Field et al. (2001) found that girls who wanted to look like figures in the media (e.g., fashion or movie stars) were much more likely than their peers to be more concerned about their weight and also exhibited a greater likelihood of purging behaviours. Although media exposure by itself does not cause eating disorders (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009), it may contribute significantly to both bulimia nervosa and anorexia nervosa, the two most common eating disorders in young women. There has been a recent increase in eating disorders in children and teens, and these eating disorders are occurring in younger and younger children (Media Awareness Network, 2001).

Boys face pressures from the media to live up to masculine stereotypes of being muscular, powerful, and 'manly' (Gray & Ginsberg, 2007). Smolak and Stein (2010) found that adolescent boys (in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade) who showed an intensification of gender role investment were more likely to be invested in media ideals of muscularity and were more likely to use muscle-building techniques. Research on the media's effect on boys and gender role development is limited, and more research is needed in this area.

## **4. Best Practices for Parents**

Although it may be difficult to monitor every aspect of children's media exposure, it is important for parents to be involved in their child's use, especially as it relates to sexual health and sexuality. Parents can help to mitigate the effects of sexual content in the media on their children. Studies have shown that parental efforts to actively involve themselves in their child's media use by helping to interpret, elaborate on, and provide supplemental information on certain topics that were introduced by television helped to counter negative or harmful content (Strasburger, Wilson, & Jordan, 2009). Adolescents who report that they discuss what they have seen on television are less likely to engage in risky sexual activity (Fisher et al., 2009).

Recommendations for parents to help mitigate media's effects on their child include the following, and will be discussed in more detail below: increased communication with the child in general, and especially in regard to healthy and developmentally appropriate information on sexual health and sexuality; media literacy skills; and monitoring their child's media consumption.

### **4.1 Communication**

Parent-child communication is essential in reducing negative sexual health outcomes (e.g., unwanted pregnancy, STIs) and to countering the effects of sexual content in the media. Although this behaviour may only be initiated in adolescence, communication about sexual health and sexuality should begin in childhood. Such communication should progress as the child develops, with more age- and developmentally-appropriate topics.

Sexuality in the media can be used as a way for parents to start conversations about sexual health and sexuality with their children (Albert, 2010). Parents are important sources of information on sexual health for their children and can be useful in helping to correct misinformation that is portrayed in the media. Parents should begin communication with their children at an early age, with developmentally appropriate materials. In early childhood, topics such as gender roles, social relationships, and clothing choice can be used to initiate discussion based on information found in the

media (e.g., commercials, television programs, movies). As children age, these discussions should continue, as well as more information on sexual development, safe and appropriate sexual behaviour, and romantic relationships; these discussions may be triggered by sexual content in the media.

For more information on parents as sexual health educators for their children, see the report by the Saskatchewan Prevention Institute (2011), *Parents as Sexual Health Educators*.

Parents should also engage their children in conversations that question the media, especially in areas of sexual content. For this to be attainable, parents must first be aware of the media that their child is taking in, and the potential sexual content in that media. This may involve parents watching, listening to or otherwise screening the media that their child is using. This will be discussed further below (*Section 4.2: Media Literacy*).

#### **4.2 Media Literacy**

Children may not have the ability to distinguish what happens in the media from reality (Troseth & DeLoache, 1998). They may believe the characters on television to be real, and may also believe that the situations they encounter and the way that they respond to these situations to be real (Dietz & Strasburger, 1991). Although children develop this ability as they age (Flavell & Flavell, 1990), it poses many potential problems for children in regard to sexual behaviour, relationships, and overall health (as discussed above). A potential solution to this is to develop a child's media literacy.

Media literacy is a way to educate children about the role that media plays in their lives (KFF, 2003) and can be defined as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and produce communication in a variety of forms (KFF, 2003). In general, children do not have the ability or education to be able to critically analyze the information and messages that they receive from the media. In order to improve children's understanding of the media, parents must help them to develop media literacy skills.

There are several concepts that children and teenagers should learn and that contribute to media literacy in children. These include (KFF, 2003):

- **Media messages are constructed** or construed by those working in the advertising and/or entertainment industry who are trying to convey a certain idea over other ideas. This also implies that the media does not describe the only way to think or believe.
- **Each form of media uses a unique set of rules to construct messages.** These messages are developed with the goal of gaining people's attention or accentuating something that the media's producers want to stand out. This means that the media may manipulate information for their own purposes.

- **Messages in the media are only one possible representation of reality.** These messages represent the values and points of view of those creating the messages.
- **People interpret media messages differently,** based on personal experiences, beliefs, and values. Therefore, everyone may have a slightly different interpretation of what they see or hear in the media.
- **Media outlets are used for profit and will do what they need to capture attention.** As such, media messages are filled with values and opinions that the producers of the media feel will gain the desired attention.

Media literacy can be effective in reducing the negative impact of the media. Research has shown that media literacy skills can help high school girls to enhance their self-acceptance and empowerment even in the constant presence of women's bodies in the media (KFF, 2003), and media literacy has been used extensively in other areas relating to media content such as violence; alcohol, drug and tobacco use; and fitness (KFF, 2003).

Media literacy can be used to help children understand the realities behind the portrayals of sexual content and sexuality that are found in the media. Parents need to ensure that they are being active in their own media literacy skills so that they can recognize issues when necessary and also so they can help their children to be media literate.

#### **4.3 Monitoring**

Unmonitored consumption of media can have negative consequences for children, such as an increased exposure to sexual content (Kim et al., 2006). Parents can play an important role in mitigating these negative effects by monitoring and mediating their child's television consumption (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001). It is important for parents to know what their children are watching, and to provide guidance for which media the child is allowed to take in. In a survey of over 1000 parents in the United States, 65% reported that they closely monitored their children's media habits (Nielsen Company, 2009). However, there is also a mismatch in children's report of media use versus the media exposure that parents report that their children get (Jordan, Hersey, McDivitt, & Heitzler, 2006).

Monitoring of media includes both the parent's approval of the program and its characters and parents' critical discussion of the program with their children (Fujioka & Austin, 2002). Parents often use rules to mediate their child's media consumption (Nathanson, 2006). When using such a method, it is still important to ensure that the child understands why the program is inappropriate and that any sexual content that the child is exposed to via media sources is discussed. It is not enough to just make



rules about media consumption; the parents must still take an active role in their child's learning and understanding about content viewed in the media.

Parental rules about media use can have a positive impact on child behaviour. Rules about what media the child is allowed to access or what information the child is allowed to give out online can make a difference in how the child interacts with the media; this is especially true of younger children (Media Awareness Network, 2005). Children may be more likely to break parent's rules about media usage as they get older; however, the presence of the rule may affect behaviour positively and may also help to increase the amount of time parents spend supervising their children's media activities (Media Awareness Network, 2005).

Parents may not know what their children are watching. They may not be as acquainted with children's media and technology as their children are. This necessitates parents becoming familiar with the technology that their children are using, and also becoming more involved in their child's media usage in order to ensure that they are able to monitor it effectively.

In order to be most effective in monitoring children's media usage, parents should not permit their children to have televisions, other media consoles (e.g., video games, computers), or Internet access (via computer or phone) in their bedrooms. Media viewing increases by 1 to 2 hours per day if the child has a television in his or her bedroom, and parents are not able to monitor their child's media viewing or be active in discussing content that the child may experience (Jordan et al., 2010).

Parents should also be mindful of their own media usage. Family characteristics are the strongest contributors to viewing patterns as children age (KFF, 2005). If parents' media use is heavy, it strongly predicts heavy media use in their children (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2010). As well, the content parents are watching may affect their children. Children tend to watch adult programs with their parents and children's programs when their parents are not present (KFF, 2005). This indicates that children's viewing of more adult-targeted programs may be determined by their parents' viewing habits (KFF, 2005). In this way, children may also be exposed to more sexual content than they would be when watching more developmentally appropriate media.

With an increase in technology, it has become easier for parents to filter the media that their child has access to through the use of firewalls, passwords, and access codes. This is one method parents can use to monitor their children's media intake without having to watch them constantly (Malamuth & Impett, 2001).

#### 4.4 Overall Recommendations for Media Habits

The Media Awareness Network and the Canadian Paediatric Society (2003) have several recommendations for parents for managing media use in the home, in regard to sexual content. These include:

- **Starting early.** Starting media management and good media habits when the child is young will increase the parent's ability to enforce restrictions or influence choices as the child grows older.
- **Self-regulation.** The parent should look at his or her own media habits and change them if necessary in order to be a good role model for the child.
- **Balance.** Parents should ensure that their child's media use is balanced with physical activities, hobbies, creative play, and playing outdoors.
- **Keep television, computers, gaming equipment and cell phones with Internet access out of the child's bedroom.** This will also ensure that late-night chatting and surfing do not cut into sleep time.
- **Taking an active role in media exposure.** Parents should get involved with their child's media – watch, play, and listen with them.
- **Variety.** Encourage the child to sample a variety of quality media and guide them to make good media choices.
- **Ratings.** Learn about the Canadian and U.S. rating systems for television, music, movies, and video games; these can be helpful in choosing appropriate media for children. See *Section 4.6: Rating Systems for Media Consumption* for more information.
- **Communication.** Talk to the child about stereotypical and violent images in the media and about strategies advertisers use to market to children.







#### 4.5 Rating Systems for Media Consumption

##### 4.5.1 Film Classification System and Guidelines for Saskatchewan

In Saskatchewan, producers and networks must display information that explains the film's classification and associated colour codes. Table 1 explains each of the classifications and the age group for which it is appropriate.

**Table 1: Film Classifications in Saskatchewan**

(Adapted from Saskatchewan Film Classification Board, 2007)



Symbol	Classification	Description
	<b>General (G)</b>	The contents are considered acceptable for all age groups. Films in this category are allowed to include, but must include a warning for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Occasional violence</li> <li>• Occasional swearing and coarse language</li> <li>• The most innocent of sexually suggestive scenes and nudity</li> </ul>
	<b>Parental Guidance (PG)</b>	The themes or content of the film may not be suitable for all children, although there is no age restriction.
	<b>14A</b>	The film is suitable for viewing by people aged 14 or older. Children under 14 are admitted if accompanied by an adult. Parents are cautioned. Films with this rating may contain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• Coarse language</li> <li>• Sexually suggestive scenes</li> </ul>
	<b>18A</b>	The film is suitable for viewing by people aged 18 or older – not for people under age 18 unless accompanied by an adult. Parents Strongly Cautioned. Films with this rating may contain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Horror</li> <li>• Explicit violence</li> <li>• Frequent coarse language</li> <li>• Sexually suggestive scenes</li> </ul>
	<b>Restricted (R)</b>	People under the age of 18 are not granted entrance to films with this classification. Films with this rating may contain: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sexually explicit scenes</li> <li>• Brutal violence</li> <li>• Intense horror and/or other disturbing scenes</li> <li>• Frequent use of coarse language and swearing</li> </ul>
	<b>Adult (A)</b>	Admittance to films classified as Adult is restricted to people 18 years and older. The content is not suitable for minors – contains predominantly sexually explicit activity.



#### 4.5.2 Canadian Television Classification System



Table 2 depicts the Canadian Television Classification System for English-Language programs. This denotes the ratings for television programs that are suitable for certain age groups. Of interest in this paper are the 'Children', 'Children over 8 Years', 'General', and 'Parental Guidance' categories. Programs that are exempt from classification include: news, sports, documentaries, talk shows, music videos, and variety programming. As these programs may still contain sexual content, especially music videos (see *Section 2.5: Music & Music Videos*), it is important for parents to preview media that their child will be exposed to and monitor their use of such media.

**Table 2: Canadian Television Classification System**

(Adapted from Action Group on Violence on Television [AGVOT], 1997)

Symbol	Classification	Description
	<b>Children</b>	<p>These programs are intended for children under the age of 8 years and therefore must adhere to the provisions of the <i>Children's Section</i> of the <i>Canadian Association of Broadcasters (CAB) Voluntary Code on Violence in Television Programming</i>.</p> <p>These programs should contain no realistic scenes of violence; aggressive behaviour should be infrequent and limited to portrayals that are clearly imaginary and unrealistic in nature.</p> <p>These programs should not contain any offensive language nor any sexual content or nudity.</p>
	<b>Children over 8 Years</b>	<p>These programs are intended to be acceptable for youngsters 8 years and older to view on their own; for children under 8 years, parents should co-view the programming.</p> <p>Programming with this classification adheres to the provisions of the <i>Children's Section</i> of the <i>CAB Voluntary Code on Violence</i>. This includes not portraying violence as the preferred, acceptable, or only way to resolve conflict, nor encouraging children to imitate dangerous acts that they may see on the screen.</p>

Symbol	Classification	Description
		<p>These programs may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Themes that may be unsuitable for younger children; any references to such themes shall be discreet and sensitive to the 8-12 year age range of this viewing group.</li> <li>• Violence, but any realistic depictions should be infrequent, discreet, of low intensity, and should portray the consequences of violence. Violence portrayed must be within the context of the storyline or character development. Violence may include mild physical violence, comedic violence, comic horror, special effects, fantasy, supernatural, or animated violence.</li> <li>• No profanity, but may have infrequent use of language which may be considered socially offensive or discriminatory (only within the context of storyline or character development).</li> <li>• No sexual content.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>General</b></p>	<p>This classification is acceptable for all groups and is appropriate for the whole family. Because young children may be a part of the viewing audience, this programming should contain limited violence in general and no realistic scenes of violence. These programs may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Minimal, infrequent violence.</li> <li>• Comedic, unrealistic depictions of violence.</li> <li>• Inoffensive slang but no profanity.</li> <li>• No sexual content.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Parental Guidance</b></p>	<p>This programming is intended for a general audience and may not be suitable for children under age 8. Some content elements may be inappropriate for unsupervised viewing by children in the 8-13 year age range. These programs may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Controversial themes or issues.</li> <li>• Limited and moderate depictions of conflict and/or aggression.</li> <li>• Physical, fantasy, or supernatural violence.</li> <li>• Infrequent and mild profanity/mildly suggestive language/brief scenes of nudity.</li> <li>• Limited and discreet sexual references or content when appropriate to the storyline or theme.</li> </ul>

Symbol	Classification	Description
	<b>Over 14 Years</b>	<p>These programs may not be suitable for viewers under the age of 14. Parents are strongly cautioned to exercise discretion in permitting pre-teens and early teens to watch these programs without parent/guardian supervision. These programs may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence, even intense scenes of violence.</li> <li>• Strong or frequent use of profanity.</li> <li>• Scenes of nudity and/or sexual activity within the context of narrative or theme.</li> </ul>
	<b>Adults</b>	<p>These programs are intended for viewers 18 years and older and are unsuitable for viewers under the age of 18. These programs may include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depictions of violence, which while integral to the development of plot, character or themes, are intended for adult viewing; these are not suitable for audiences under 18 years of age.</li> <li>• Graphic language.</li> <li>• Explicit portrayals of sex and/or nudity.</li> </ul>

#### 4.5.3 Film Classification System for the United States

Films that are produced in the United States and that children may be exposed to at home (e.g., via DVD, on television) may have a different rating than those given by Canadian systems; as such, the American system is outlined below in Table 3.

**Table 3: Film Classification System for the United States**

(Adapted from the Classification & Rating Administration, 2012)

Classification	Description
<b>General (G)</b>	These films contain no material that would offend parents for viewing by their children.
<b>Parental Guidance (PG)</b>	Parents are urged to use 'parental guidance' as the film may contain some material that parents might not like their younger children to view.
<b>PG-13</b>	Parents are urged to be cautious as some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers.
<b>Restricted (R)</b>	These films contain some adult materials. As such, it is generally not appropriate for viewing by children.
<b>NC-17</b>	These films contain adult content, and children and adolescents under the age of 18 are not admitted.

## 5. Conclusion

Children's exposure to the media can have lasting effects, especially in regard to sexual content. Sex and sexuality in the media are widespread, even those programs that are targeted at children. Parents need to be cognizant of this potential exposure and active in their role of mitigating the negative effects of sexual content in the media.

With a growing emphasis on technology in our society, children are exposed to many different forms of media every day, such as television, movies, Internet, video games, and print. Despite recommendations from health officials, children may be exposed to up to 53 hours of entertainment media per week.

This exposure may have lasting effects on children. Although the media can be used for sexual education and other types of learning, the majority of the effects of sexual content in the media are negative. Portrayals of sexual activity and sexuality are often inaccurate and unrealistic, and they do not depict healthy relationships or sexual activity. Gender roles are often stereotypical and emphasis is placed on physical attractiveness, even in young children. This can affect children's understanding of sexual health and sexuality, gender role construction, stereotypical thinking, self image, and sexual activity.

Parents must take steps to mitigate the effects of sexual content in the media on their children. Firstly, parents should monitor and limit the amount and types of media that their children are accessing and should be prepared to talk about any content that the child is viewing. Secondly, parents should communicate with their children about sexual health and sexuality as they develop and should make sure to discuss any conflicting content that has been seen in the media. Thirdly, parents and their children should become media literate, recognizing the underlying goals of the media and how it relates to sexual content.

## References

- AAP. (2011). Media use by children younger than 2 years. *Pediatrics*, *125*, 1-6. doi:10.1542/peds.2011-1753.
- Action Group on Violence on Television [AGVOT]. (1997). Broadcaster manual for the Canadian program classification system using on-screen icons. Retrieved from <http://www.cbcs.ca/english/agvot/AGVOTmanual.pdf>
- Albert, B. (2010). *With one voice 2010: America's adults and teen sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy.
- American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP]. (2001). Sexuality, contraception, and the media. *Pediatrics*, *107*, 191-194. doi:10.1542/peds.107.1.191
- American Psychological Association Task Force on Advertising and Children. (2004). *Report of the APA task force on advertising and children*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- American Psychological Association Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls. (2007). *Report of the APA task force on the sexualization of girls*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Anderson, D. R., Bryant, J., Wilder, A., Santomero, A., Williams, M., & Crawley, A. M. (2000). Researching Blue's Clues: Viewing behavior and impact. *Media Psychology*, *2*, 179-194.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, *55*, 469-480. doi: 10.1037/0003-066X.55.5.469
- Arnett, J. J. (2002). The sounds of sex: Sex in teens' music and music videos. In Brown, J. D., Steele, J. R., & Walsh-Childers, K. (Eds.). *Sexual teens, sexual media: Investigating media's influence on adolescent sexuality* (pp. 253-264). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Aubrey, J. S. (2006). Exposure to sexually objectifying media and body self-perceptions among college women: An examination of the selective exposure hypothesis and the role of moderating variables. *Sex Roles*, *55*, 159-172.
- Ballam, S. M. & Granello, P. F. (2011). Confronting sex in the media: Implications and counseling recommendations. *The Family Journal: Counseling and Therapy for Couples & Families*, *19*, 421-426. doi: 10.1177/1066480711417237
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Barriga, C. A., Shapiro, M. A., & Jhaveri, R. (2009). Media context, female body size and perceived realism. *Sex Roles*, *60*, 128-141. doi:10.1007/s11199-008-9482-7
- Bleakley, A., Hennessy, M., Fishbein, M., Jordan, A. (2008). It works both ways: The relationship between sexual content in the media and adolescent sexual behavior. *Media Psychology*, *11*, 443-461.
- Brown, J. D., Halpern, C. T., & L'Engle, K. L. (2005). Mass media as a sexual super peer for early maturing girls. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *36*, 420-427.



- Brown, J. D. & Keller, S. N. (2000). Can the mass media be healthy sex educators? *Family Planning Perspectives, 32*, 255-256.
- Brown, J. D., Steele, J. R., & Walsh-Childers, K. (Eds.). (2002). *Sexual teens, sexual media: Investigating media's influence on adolescent sexuality*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Canadian Paediatric Society [CPS]. (2003). Impact of media use on children and youth. *Paediatric Child Health, 8*, 301-306.
- Canadian Teachers' Federation. (2003). *Kid's take on media*. Toronto, ON: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.ctf-fce.ca/documents/Resources/en/MERP/kidsenglish.pdf>
- Center for Parent/Youth Understanding. (2001). *Prime time TV: "The sour family hour"*. Elizabethtown, PA: Author.
- Chandra, A., Martino, S. C., Collins, R. L., Elliott, M. N., Berry, S. H., Kanouse, D. E., & Miu, A. (2008). Does watching sex on television predict teen pregnancy? Findings from a national longitudinal survey of youth. *Pediatrics, 122*, 1047-1054. doi: 10.1542/peds.2007-3066
- Children Now. (2001). *Fair play? Violence, gender and race in video games*. Oakland, CA: Author.
- Classification & Rating Administration. (2012). Ratings. Retrieved from [http://www.filmratings.com/filmRatings\\_Cara/#/ratings/](http://www.filmratings.com/filmRatings_Cara/#/ratings/)
- Collins, R. L., Elliott, M. N., Berry, S. H., Kanouse, D. E., Kunkel, D., Hunter, S. B., & Miu, A. (2004). Watching sex on television predicts adolescent initiation of sexual behavior. *Pediatrics, 114*, e280-289. doi:10.1542/peds.2003-1065-L
- Cope, K. & Kunkel, D. (2001). Sexual messages in teens' favorite prime-time programs. In J. Brown, J. Steele & K. Walsh-Childers (Eds.), *Sexual teens. Sexual media*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Davis, S. (2003). Sex stereotypes in commercials targeted toward children: A content analysis. *Sociological Spectrum 23*, 407-424. doi:10.1080/02732170390225331
- Dietz, W. H. & Strasburger, V. C. (1991). Children, adolescents and television. *Current Problems in Pediatrics, 21*, 8-31.
- Dohnt, H. & Tiggemann, M. (2006). The contribution of peer and media influences to the development of body satisfaction and self-esteem in young girls: A prospective study. *Developmental Psychology, 42*, 929-936. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.42.5.929
- Downs, E. & Smith, S. (2005). Keeping abreast of hypersexuality: A video game character content analysis. *Sex Roles, 62*, 721-733. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9637-1
- Ferrante, C. L., Haynes, A. M., & Kingsley, S. M. (1988). Image of women in television advertising. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 32*, 231-237. doi:10.1080/08838158809386697
- Field, A. E., Camargo, C. A., Taylor, C. B., Berkey, C. S., Roberts, S. B., & Colditz, G. A. (2001). Peer, parent, and media influences on the development of weight concerns and frequent dieting among preadolescent and adolescent girls and boys. *Pediatrics, 103*, e36.
- Fisch, S. M. (2004). *Children's learning from educational television: Sesame Street and beyond*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

- Fisher, D. A., Hill, D. L., Grube, J. W., Bersamin, M. M., Walker, S., & Gruber, E. (2009). Televised sexual content and parental mediation: Influences on adolescent sexuality. *Media Psychology, 12*, 121-147.
- Flavell, J. H. & Flavell, E. R. (1990). Do young children think of television images as picture or real objects? *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 34*, 399-480.
- Fujioka, Y. & Austin, E. W. (2002). The relationship of family communication patterns to parental mediation styles. *Communication Research, 29*, 642-665.
- Gadassi, R. & Gati, I. (2009). The effect of gender stereotypes on explicit and implicit career preferences. *Counselling Psychologist, 27*, 902-922.
- Gerbner, G., Gross, L., Morgan, M., Signorielli, N., & Shanahan, J. (2002). Growing up with television: Cultivation processes. In J. Bryant & D. Zillmann (Eds.), *Media effects: Advances in theory and research*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Gray, J. & Ginsberg, R. (2007). Muscle dissatisfaction: An overview of the psychological and cultural research and theory. In J.K. Thompson & G. Cafri (Eds.), *The muscular ideal: Psychological, social, and medical perspectives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Hawkes, K. (2012). Media and clothing market influence on adolescent girls: Warning for parents. Retrieved from <http://foreverfamilies.byu.edu/>
- Hust, S. J. T., Wong, W. J., & Chen, Y. (2011). FCP and mediation styles: Factors associated with parents' intentions to let their children watch violent, sexual and family-oriented television content. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 55*, 380-399. doi:10.1080/08838151.2011.597465
- Jordan, A., Bleakley, A., Manganello, J., Hennessy, M., Stevens, R., & Fishbein, M. (2010). The role of television access in viewing time of U.S. adolescents. *Journal of Child Media, 4*, 355-370. doi:10.1080/17482798.2010.510004
- Jordan, A., Hersey, J., McDivitt, J., & Heitzler, C. (2006). Reducing children's television-viewing time: A qualitative study of parents and their children. *Pediatrics, 118*, e1303-e1310. doi: 10.1542/peds.2006-0732
- Kahlenberg, S. G. & Hein, M. M. (2010). Progression on Nickelodeon? Gender-role stereotypes in toy commercials. *Sex Roles, 62*, 830-847. doi:10.1007/s11199-009-9653-1
- Kaiser Family Foundation [KFF]. (2003). Key facts: Media literacy. Menlo Park, CA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Key-Facts-Media-Literacy.pdf>
- KFF. (2005). *The effects of electronic media on children ages zero to six: A history of research*. Menlo Park, CA: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/The-Effects-of-Electronic-Media-on-Children-Ages-Zero-to-Six-A-History-of-Research-Issue-Brief.pdf>
- Kim, J. L., Collins, R. L., Kanouse, D. E., Elliott, M. N., Berry, S. H., Hunter, S. B., ... Kunkel, D. (2006). Sexual readiness, household policies, and other predictors of adolescents' exposure to sexual content in mainstream entertainment television. *Media Psychology, 8*, 449-471. Doi:10.1207/s1532785xmep0804\_6

- Kunkel, D., Biely, E., Eyal, K., Cope-Farrar, K., Donnerstein, E., & Fandrich, R. (2003). *Sex on TV 3: A biennial report of the Kaiser Family Foundation*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Kunkel, D., Eyal, K., Finnerty, K., Biely, E., & Donnerstein, E. (2005). *Sex on TV*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation. Retrieved from <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/Sex-on-TV-4-Full-Report.pdf>
- L'Engle, K. L., Brown, J. D., & Kenneavy, K. (2006). The mass media are an important context for adolescents' sexual behavior. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 38*, 186-192. doi:10.1016/j.adohealth.2005.03.020
- Lauzen, M. M. & Dozier, D. M. (2002). You look mahvelous: An examination of gender and appearance comments in the 1999-2000 prime-time season. *Sex Roles, 40*, 107-120.
- Leaper, C., Breed, L., Hoffman, L., & Perlman, C. A. (2002). Variations in the gender-stereotyped content of children's television cartoons across genres. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 32*, 1653-1662.
- Lin, C. A. (1998). Uses of sex appeals in prime-time television commercials. *Sex Roles, 38*, 461-475.
- Lindner, K. (2004). Images of women in general interest and fashion magazine advertisements from 1955 to 2002. *Sex Roles, 51*, 409-421.
- Linebarger, D. L. & Walker, D. (2005). Infants' and toddlers' television viewing and language outcomes. *American Behavioral Science, 48*, 624-645. doi:10.1177/0002764204271515
- Malamuth, N. M. & Impett, E. A. (2001). Research on sex in the media: What do we know about effects on children and adolescents? In D.G. Singer & J.L. Singer (Eds.) *Handbook of children and the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Malkin, A. R., Wornian, K., & Chrisler, J. C. (1999). Women and weight: Gendered messages on magazine covers. *Sex Roles, 40*, 647-655.
- Media Awareness Network. (2000). *Young Canadians in a wired world: The parents' view*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Media Awareness Network. (2001). *Young Canadians in a wired world: The students' view*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Media Awareness Network. (2005). *Young Canadians in a wired world: Phase II trends and recommendations*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Media Awareness Network. (2010). *Sex and relationships in the media*. Retrieved from [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women\\_and\\_girls/women\\_sex.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/issues/stereotyping/women_and_girls/women_sex.cfm)
- Mou, Y. & Peng, W. (2009). Gender and racial stereotypes in popular video games. In R. Ferdig (Ed.), *Handbook of research on effective electronic gaming in education (pp. 922-937)*. Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Nathanson, A. I. (2006). Adult mediation of violence effects. In J.J. Arnett (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of children, adolescents, and the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.

- Nielsen Company (2009). *How teens use media: A Nielsen report on the myths and realities of teen media trends*. New York, NY: Author.
- Paek, H., Nelson, M. R., & Vilela, A. (2011). Examination of gender-role portrayals in television advertising across seven countries. *Sex Roles, 64*, 192-207. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9850-y
- Pardun, C. J., L'Engle, K. L., & Brown, J. D. (2005). Linking exposure to outcomes: Early adolescents' consumption of sexual content in sex media. *Mass Communication & Society, 8*, 75-91.
- Parents Television Council. (2007). *The alarming family hour... No place for children*. Los Angeles, CA: Parents Television Council.
- Peter, J., & Valkenburg, P. M. (2006). Adolescents' exposure to sexually explicit material on the internet. *Communication Research, 33*, 178-204.
- Potter, R. & Potter, L. (2001). The internet, cyberporn, and sexual exploitation of children: Media moral panics and urban myths for middle-class parents? *Sexuality & Culture, 5*, 31-48. doi:10.1007/s12119-001-1029-9
- Potter, W. J. (1998). *Media Literacy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Public Health Agency of Canada. [PHAC] (2008). *Canadian guidelines for sexual health education*. Ottawa, ON: Author.
- Rice, M. L., Huston, A. C., Truglio, R., & Wright, J. C. (1990). Words from "Sesame Street": Learning vocabulary while viewing. *Developmental Psychology, 26*, 421-428.
- Rideout, V. J., Foehr, U. G., & Roberts, D. F. (2010). *Generation M2: Media in the lives of 8- to 18-year-olds*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Rideout, V. J., Vandewater, E. A., & Wartella, E. A. (2003). *Zero to six: Electronic media in the lives of infants toddlers and preschoolers*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Roberts, D. F., Foehr, U. G., & Rideout, V. (2005). *Generation M: Media in the lives of 8-18 year-olds*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Saskatchewan Film Classification Board. (2007). Film classification system and guidelines. Retrieved from <http://www.justice.gov.sk.ca/Film-Classification>
- Saskatchewan Prevention Institute (2011). *Parents as sexual health educators*. Saskatoon, SK: Author.
- Shields, C. J. (1993). How the media eroticizes children, and how sex education courses on 'human plumbing' fail to protect them. *Curriculum Review, 32*, 3-8.
- Smolak, L. & Stein, J. A. (2010). A longitudinal investigation of gender role and muscle building in adolescent boys. *Sex Roles, 63*, 738-746. doi: 10.1007/s11199-010-9819-x
- Sommers-Flanagan, R., Sommers-Flanagan, J., & Davis, B. (1993). What's happening on music television? A gender role content analysis. *Sex Roles, 28*, 745-753.
- Strasburger, V. C. (2004). Children, adolescents, and the media. *Current Problems in Pediatric and Adolescent Health Care, 32*, 54-113.

- Strasburger, V. C. (2005). Adolescents, sex, and the media: Ooooo, baby, baby. *Adolescent Medical Clinics*, 16, 269-288. doi:10.1016/j.admecli.2005.02.009
- Strasburger, V. C. (2006). Risky business: What primary care practitioners need to know about the influence of the media on adolescents. *Primary Care: Clinics in Office Practice*, 33, 317-348. doi:10.1016/j.pop.2006.02.004
- Strasburger, V. C., Jordan, A. B., & Donnerstein, E. (2010). Health effects of media on children and adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 125, 756-767. doi: 10.1542/peds.2009-2563
- Strasburger, V. C., Wilson, B. J., & Jordan, A. B. (2009). *Children, adolescents, and the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.
- Taylor, L. D. & Hansen, D. L. (2007). Sexual information, internet/magazines. In J.J. Arnett (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of children, adolescents, and the media*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publishers.
- ter Bogt, T. F. M., Engels, R., Bogers, S., & Kloosterman, M. (2010). "Shake it baby, shake it": Media preferences, sexual attitudes and gender stereotypes among adolescents. *Sex Roles*, 63, 844-859. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9815-1
- The Centre for Youth and Media Studies. (2010). *A national study on children's television programming in Canada*. Montreal, QC: Alliance for Children and Television. Retrieved from <http://www.ymamj.org/pdf/nationalstudy.pdf>
- Troseth, G. L. & DeLoache, J. S. (1998). The medium can obscure the message: Young children's understanding of video. *Child Development*, 69, 950-965.
- Wallis, C. (2011). Performing gender: A content analysis of gender display in music videos. *Sex Roles*, 64, 160-172. doi:10.1007/s11199-010-9814-2
- 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*, 31, 1-15.
- Weinstein, D. (2000). *Heavy metal: The music and its culture*. New York, NY: Da Capo.
- Wingood, G. M., DiClemente, R. J., Harrington, K., Davies, S., Hook, E. W., & Oh, M. K. (2001). Exposure to X-rated movies and adolescents' sexual and contraceptive-related attitudes and behavior. *Pediatrics*, 107, 1116-1119.
- Wright, J. C., Huston, A. C., Murphy, K. C., St.Peters, M., Pinon, M., Scantlin, R., & Kotler, J. (2001). The relations of early television viewing to school readiness and vocabulary of children from low-income families: The early window project. *Child Development*, 72, 1347-1366.
- Zimmerman, F. J., Christakis, D. A., & Meltzoff, A. N. (2007). Television and DVD/video viewing in children younger than 2 years. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine*, 161, 473-479. Retrieved from <http://archpedi.ama-assn.org/>