

## Countering Mass Media's Negative Influence

I once asked a young fan of ABC-TV's "Desperate Housewives" which of its characters she considers good role models. She laughed as she exclaimed, "None of them!" I was pleased by her response because I know that people remember more vividly what they themselves conclude and verbalize, not what others tell them.

I am increasingly disturbed by messages conveyed through television programs, websites, advertising, movies, books, billboards, magazines and video games. All of these have the power to shape how boys and girls think about themselves and the values by which they may choose to live. We need to pay closer attention to what our children listen to and view if we are to effectively counter or moderate media influence. **Teens exposed to a lot of sexual content on television are two to three times more likely to become sexually active than those who see little of it**, according to a study reported by Carol Potera in the February *American Journal of Nursing*, "Sex and Violence in the Media Influence Teen Behavior." Programs portraying casual sexual activity as risk-free, normal behavior mislead young, impressionable viewers. Children need to know about the emotional costs and relationship hazards of sexual activity that does not involve love and commitment, emphasizes Carita Rizzo in a *TV Guide* article, "Does Sex on TV Influence Teens?" (Dec. 1, 2008). Potera reports similar media influence regarding violence: **"Youths who most frequently visit [websites] depicting real people fighting, shooting or killing were five times more likely to report engaging in assaults, stabbings, robberies and other violent behavior than were those who never visited violent sites."**

On a more subtle level, we need to be mindful of efforts to exploit our children for profit. Marketers hire psychologists to research what children want and what they respond to. These marketers want to create "brand loyalty" among shoppers starting at a very young age. Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown, authors of *Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes*, analyzed advertising. **They found that marketers use advertising to promote three messages to girls: looks matter above all else; thin and sexy is the ideal; boyfriends and shopping should be the center of their attention.**

Belinda Luscombe in "The Truth About Teen Girls" (*Time Magazine*, Sept. 22, 2008) discusses the detrimental effect of such marketing. When combined with today's earlier onset of puberty, she asserts that **messages emphasizing sexuality can stunt development of other interests and involvements.** Media messages strategically target boys as well. By often portraying boys as rebellious and out of control, media reinforce sullen, surly, and aggressive behavior, according to Dr. Meg Meeker. Her book, *Boys Should Be Boys: 7 Secrets to Raising Healthy Sons*, reports on a study conducted with college students. **The study found that males who view sexual material - not just pornography, tend to be significantly more accepting of aggression against women than those who do not.**

Both genders need parents and church and community leaders to model, teach, and encourage acceptable standards of behavior. It is important, but not enough, to advocate for improved quality of television programming and to place reasonable restrictions on TV viewing and movie choices. Most of all, **our children and youth need persuasive communication from us, accompanied by good questions to help them process what they observe.** Overt criticism and

harsh judgments may simply cause them to rebel and reactively defend their viewing and listening choices. Instead of lecturing or ranting, try Susan Vogt's suggestion: "...take a tip from the media and try talking in sound bytes. **Decide ahead of time the core message, reduce it to a short sentence, look your teen in the eye, say it, and stop.**" (Parenting Pointers #271, [www.SusanVogt.net](http://www.SusanVogt.net)) **Then, rather than talking in an attempt to drive your point home, listen respectfully and reflectively to your children's responses. Ask good questions to encourage critical thinking.**

Faith communities can help counter negative media influences by offering not only effective programming for youth, but also **training and support for parents in our congregations and communities. Strong, healthy families can help youth resist the lure of instant gratification, materialism, and selfish individualism.** Parent groups can provide communication and conflict management skills training. They also can strengthen parents through peer support. Even more than programming, however, **the relationships youths experience with Christian adults other than their own parents may most powerfully influence their values and behavior.**

The United Methodist Church supports comprehensive sexuality education with an emphasis on abstinence for youth. **One of the most powerful motivators for sexual abstinence is a positive view of marriage as a worthy goal and source of happiness.** Congregations can promote such a view by affirming and celebrating marriage. They can provide support for healthy marriages and families by equipping parents and other adults to grow their own relationships and serve as good role models. Not all persons will marry, of course. Those who are single need validation and community just as much as do those who marry and/or live in intact families. Regrettably, media often portray singles as rejects and/or sexually promiscuous. **Parents and faith communities should validate singleness as a potentially fulfilling way of life. We should encourage all persons to recognize and value their gifts and graces, set meaningful goals, develop nurturing relationships, and contribute to community life.**

Young people who think they might be gay are particularly vulnerable, given the negative stereotypes of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons that still abound. If we react to their self-searching with dismay, we teach them self-loathing and drive them toward a life of hiding and loneliness. **We need to stay in respectful relationship with all youth and lovingly support their quests for self-understanding and acceptance.**

Given the amount of time our children are exposed to television, advertising, movies, popular music, websites, and video games, we can ill afford to ignore the messages they are receiving. The faith community's silence on this subject may easily be interpreted as sanction of those messages. **We probably cannot ever completely eliminate such influences; we can, however, counter them with compelling alternative points of view.** Within the context of relationship education, the faith community can use media to explore what makes relationships healthy. Invite teens to discuss and assess how television programs portray dating and marriage relationships. Use movies as springboards for discussions about relationship choices and consequences. Adults also might well assess the impact of media on their own moods, attitudes and behavior. **In addition to sharing Christian perspectives and values directly with youths, we must equip parents, teachers and other adults to listen carefully, speak clearly, and encourage critical thinking.**

### **Questions for reflection and discussion:**

1. While growing up, what did you learn from your parents and/or other significant adults about sex?
2. While growing up, what did you learn from media about sex?
3. Which of these learnings were helpful, and which have you had to unlearn?
4. What programs do you watch now that convey positive messages about relationships and sex?
5. What programs convey negative messages about relationships and sex?
6. What programs seem to glorify violence?
7. How do you decide whether sex and/or violence in a particular program, movie, song, advertisement or other context is appropriate and essential for the story, or whether it is unnecessary and inserted only to shock and arouse?

**Application:** Watch programs that you know specific youth or youth in general enjoy. Practice formulating good questions to stimulate critical thinking, and ask those questions when you get a chance.

- Who did you like in that show? Why? Who did you dislike? Why?
- How do you think it would feel to live with someone like that?
- How can you avoid getting into a situation like that?
- What other choices did that character have? What would you have done?
- What do you think might be the result of other choices?

### **Resources for Countering Mass Media’s Negative Influence**

See also “Equipping Youth to Build Healthy Relationships,” “Empowering Parents,” and “Resources for Empowering Parents” under Parenting in the Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources section at [www.marriagelovepower.net](http://www.marriagelovepower.net) (or search by title or topic at <http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries>).

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*Boys Should Be Boys: 7 Secrets to Raising Healthy Sons*, by Meg Meeker, M.D. (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 2008). This book shares sound advice on raising boys to healthy maturity and countering the negative influences prevalent in our culture.

*Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing Our Daughters from Marketers’ Schemes*, by Sharon Lamb and Lyn Mikel Brown (NY, NY: St.Martin’s Press, 2006). The authors document how marketers hire psychologists to research what children want and what they respond to in order to create “brand loyalty” among shoppers, starting at a very young age. Girls receive a message that how they look is

the most important thing about them, that they should be “thin and sexy,” and that the center of their attention should be boyfriends and shopping.

**Parents Television Council**, 213-629-9255, [www.parentstv.org](http://www.parentstv.org). This non-profit organization monitors TV programming and other media, sending detailed reports to members through a monthly newsletter, “PTC Insider: Because Our Children are Watching.” The PTC also lobbies for stricter standards by communicating with legislators, producers, and advertisers, and recently launched a campaign “for media images that value, respect, empower and promote the true value of every girl” ([www.4everygirl.org](http://www.4everygirl.org))

**Prevent Child Abuse America** ([www.preventchildabuse.org](http://www.preventchildabuse.org)) This agency partners with Channing-Bete Publishing Company to offer relevant resources. Call (800) 835-2671 or visit [www.channing-bete.com](http://www.channing-bete.com). Click on “Shop/Search Now” on the homepage and enter the following titles: “Click: Turn Off the Violence” (makes a strong case for minimizing children’s exposure to media violence on TV and the Internet and in movies, and suggests ways to do so. See also “Understanding and Preventing Dating Violence: A Guide for Teens and Parents.”

***Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys***, by Dan Kindlon, Ph.D., and Michael Thompson, Ph.D. (New York: Random House, 1999, 2000). Vividly describes effects on boys of a culture that turns them away from their inner life. The authors discuss ways to help boys deal with their conflicting needs for connection and autonomy and to help them develop healthy relationships with themselves, their families, and others.

***Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood***, by William Pollack (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1998). The author discusses the emotionally crippling effects of stereotypical expectations of males and of attempts to toughen up boys by denying their feelings. He proposes strategies for helping boys develop the self-acceptance and emotional awareness that can prevent depression, violence, substance abuse, and sexual misconduct.

***Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls***, by Mary Pipher (New York: Penguin Books, 1994). Describes the harmful effects of our culture’s pressures on girls to force themselves into narrow molds and ways to help girls build and maintain a strong sense of self.

***Strong Fathers, Strong Daughters: 10 Secrets Every Father Should Know***, by Meg Meeker, M.D. (New York: Ballentine Books, 2006). A parent and pediatrician with more than 20 years of experience discusses the essential role fathers play in the lives of their daughters and how they can most effectively provide the attention, protection, encouragement, and wisdom girls need.

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