

Television and the Internet: Important Sources of Sexual Health Information for Youth

Modern media are facts of life. Television and the Internet are central to the lives of most American children and youth. Through them, young people receive a lot of information about sexuality—some positive and accurate; some negative or incorrect. Increasingly, television professionals also provide messages that can promote youth's ability to make healthy decisions about sexuality. At the same time, high quality Web sites and Listservs can offer youth accurate information as well as links to health services near them.

Television and the Internet are important in the lives of American youth.

- On average, youth ages 14 to 18 watch television for about three hours every day and listen to music or watch music videos for another one to two hours. Young people use the Internet and/or surf the Web for about two hours at least four times a week.^{1,2,3}
- In their bedrooms, half of all American youth have a television and 16 percent have a computer.⁴ Among teens ages 15 through 17, 33 percent are online for six hours or more each week; 24 percent, for three to five hours; 23 percent, for one to two hours; and 20 percent, for less than one hour.⁵

American youth rely on television and the Internet for sexual health information.

- In one survey, 65 percent of 15- to 17-year-old youth said they got information about birth control or protection from advertising; 58 percent from television; 58 percent from magazine articles; and 39 percent from the Internet.⁶ Teens ages 13 through 15 ranked entertainment media as their top source for information on sexuality and sexual health.⁷
- Among surveyed 15- to 17-year-old youth, 51 percent of females and 33 percent of males looked up online information on a sexual health topic.⁸ Among 15- to 24-year-old youth, 44 percent went online for information about pregnancy, birth control, HIV or sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The primary reason for searching online was confidentiality for 82 percent of young women and 88 percent of young men.⁸

Media can bolster parents' knowledge and promote parent-child communication.

- Among parents of children under age 18, 70 percent say they had a conversation about sexual issues with their children because of something they saw on a television show.⁷
- Another study found that 68 percent of parents went online to look up information related to child health or to general health. At follow-up, 66 percent reported using sites specifically recommended in information prescriptions from their pediatrician.⁹

Media can have positive effects on young people's knowledge and decisions about sex.

- In the week after seeing a three-minute segment on emergency contraception (EC) during an episode of *ER*, viewers' awareness of EC increased by 17 percent. Watching *ER* also led 51 percent of viewers to talk with family and friends about a health issue raised by the show; 23 percent, to go to another source for more information; and 14 percent, to speak with a doctor.¹⁰
- Up to 1.67 million youth ages 12 to 17 saw the first airing of an episode of *Friends* in which a pregnancy resulted from condom failure. A study of these young viewers found that up to two-thirds learned from the episode that condoms can fail. Up to 17 percent said they learned something new about condoms, and 31 percent learned about condoms' efficacy to prevent pregnancy. Six months later, regular viewers were likely to remember the information about condom efficacy.¹¹
- A two-part episode of *Felicity* included information about date rape. The producers included a toll-free rape crisis hotline number in the credits at the end of the show, and the hotline received over 1,000 calls

immediately thereafter. The Media Project conducted an informal online survey after another episode of *Felicity* that included a demonstration of the correct way to use a condom. Twenty-six percent of responding young women, ages 12 to 21, felt they had learned something new about birth control and safer sex.¹²

Public education campaigns have a powerful impact on viewers' attitudes and behaviors.

- Cable Positive—a nonprofit organization founded by Request Television and HBO—has created and aired public service announcements (PSAs) in English and Spanish to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS. With the contribution of about 200 hours of air time by virtually all cable networks in the United States, the PSAs have reached at least 70 million household cable subscribers (60 percent of all U.S. households).¹³
- The seven-yearlong MTV initiative, *Fight for Your Rights*, includes sexual health information, made-for-TV movies, PSAs, grassroots campaigns, and a Web site. A study in 2003 of viewers ages 16 through 24 found that, in the past year and as a result of viewing *Fight for Your Rights: Protect Yourself*, 73 percent of youth said they were more likely to take a sexual relationship seriously; 73 percent were more likely to use condoms if having sex; 69 percent were more likely to talk to a boyfriend or girlfriend about safer sex; 66 percent were more likely to wait to have sex; and 65 percent were more likely to get tested for HIV or other STIs.¹⁴
- The *Not Me, Not Now* campaign—launched in Monroe County, New York, in an effort to lower teen pregnancy rates—provided healthy and responsible messages about abstinence by and for youth ages nine to 14. The campaign also featured television and radio advertisements and an interactive Web site, and involved communities, schools, and peer educators. After three years, the proportion of middle school students in the County who said they could handle the consequences of having sex dropped from 34 to 22 percent; the proportion of youth reporting sexual intercourse by age 15 dropped from 47 to 32 percent; and the adolescent pregnancy rate dropped from 63 to 50 per 1,000 young women ages 15 to 17. Prior to the campaign, Monroe County's teen pregnancy rate was higher than in surrounding counties. Declines occurred in all the counties, but Monroe County's was statistically significantly steeper.¹⁵
- In 1987, Germany launched the *Mach's Mit* HIV prevention campaign to normalize the use of condoms. The mass media campaign was seen consistently and across time in spots on television and in cinemas, in print media advertising, and on posters. By 1995, 81 percent of Germans who had several sex partners in the past year reported condom use, up from 54 percent at the campaign's beginning. Between 1987 and 1995, those reporting always using condoms with a casual partner rose from 23 to 45 percent.¹⁶

The public supports media efforts to provide accurate sexual health information.

- In one national survey, 71 percent of U.S. adults approved television advertising of condoms: 37 percent approved condom advertising at any time; 34 percent, only at certain times. At the same time, 60 percent of adults *disapproved* of television advertising for cigarettes; 47 percent *disapproved* television ads for hard liquor.¹⁷
- Eighty-six percent of U.S. adults polled by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention approved of airing HIV and AIDS prevention information on television; 73 percent supported condoms being discussed on television.¹

References

- ¹ American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Public Education. Sexuality, contraception, and the media. *Pediatrics* 2001; 107:191-194.
- ² Strasburger VC. Sex, drugs, rock 'n roll and the media: are the media responsible for adolescent behavior? *Adolescent Medicine: State of the Art Reviews* 1997; 8:403-414.
- ³ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Kids & Media* [Fact Sheet]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2001.
- ⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Children and Video Games* [Key Facts]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2002.
- ⁵ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Teens Online* [Key Facts]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2002.
- ⁶ Kaiser Family Foundation & *Seventeen*. *Birth Control and Protection* [SexSmarts]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, July 2004.
- ⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Teens and Sex: The Role of Popular TV* [Fact Sheet]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2001.
- ⁸ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Generation RX.com: How Young People Use the Internet for Health Information: A Kaiser Family Foundation Survey*. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2001.
- ⁹ D'Alessandro DM, Kreiter CD, Kinzer SL *et al*. A randomized, controlled trial of an information prescription for pediatric patient education on the Internet. *Archives of Pediatric & Adolescent Medicine* 2004; 158:857-862.
- ¹⁰ Kaiser Family Foundation. *The Impact of TV's Health Content: A Case Study of ER Viewers* [Survey Snapshot]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2002.
- ¹¹ Collins RL, Elliott MC, Berry SH *et al*. Entertainment television as a healthy sex educator: the impact of condom-efficacy information in an episode of *Friends*. *Pediatrics* 2003; 112:1115-1121.
- ¹² The Media Project. Unpublished data. Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 2000; Folb KL. Don't touch that dial: TV as a—what—positive influence. *SIECUS Report* 2000; 28(5):16-18.
- ¹³ Rideout V, Hoff T. *Shouting to Be Heard: Public Service Advertising in a New Media Age*. Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2002.
- ¹⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation. *National Survey of Teens and Young Adults on Sexual Health Public Education Campaigns: Topline Results*. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2003.
- ¹⁵ Doniger AS, Riley JS, Utter CA *et al*. Impact evaluation of the "Not Me, Not Now" abstinence-oriented adolescent pregnancy prevention communications program, Monroe County, New York. *Journal of Health Communication* 2001; 6:45-60.
- ¹⁶ Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung. *Aspects of the National German AIDS Prevention Campaign*. [Bonne]: Author, [2000].
- ¹⁷ Kaiser Family Foundation. *Condom Advertising on Television* [Survey Snapshot]. Menlo Park, CA: The Foundation, 2001.



Written by Beth Pellettieri

November 2004 © Advocates for Youth

2000 M Street, NW, Suite 750 • Washington, DC 20036 USA • Phone: 202.419.3420 • Fax: 202.419.1448 • www.advocatesforyouth.org