

Just Loosen Up And Start Talking – teachable moments with kids

To offset the influence of much of today's popular media, children need a supportive guide. Much of the media aimed at kids today, refers in one way or another to sex. Parents are the primary educators of their children. We teach children about road safety, good touch/bad touch and even Internet safety. We teach children about family values and a variety of other skills they need to navigate the world. But, do we teach them about what they see and hear in the popular media? Do we assist our children to think critically and analyze the media?

On average, kids spend six to seven hours each day with some form of media and that media is saturated in sexual images and messages. The American Academy of Paediatrics found that the average teen would view nearly 14,000 sexual references per year. A study by the Kaiser Family Foundation found that young teens rank the entertainment media as their top source of information about sexuality and sexual health. Increasingly, that *source of information* is full of images portraying females as primarily being sexy, even to children as young as 8 years old, so-called tweens.

Tweens (8 to 12 year olds) are important to marketers because they have money to spend, they influence their parents' buying decisions and they are the adult consumers of the future. Industry spending on advertising to children has exploded in the last decade, increasing from \$100 million in 1990 to more than \$2 **billion** in 2000.

Parents often feel confused about how to respond to the marketing that is aimed at their children. Whatever form media messages take they can be either good or bad for your child. Just as you would limit certain food in your child's diet that may be unhealthy you should also limit his or her media diet. Additionally, parents need to be actively involved with the media that children use and see. Because media cannot be avoided, one way to counteract the negative messages about sexuality is for parents to help children question, analyze and evaluate the media images and messages they see.

Remember, talking to kids about media is an ongoing activity starting from early childhood. Don't leave it until they are teens because they may not want to listen to you then. Here are some ways you can start talking:

- Watch what your child watches. Watch the first time without offering opinions. Just take in what you see and hear; learn what your child likes.
- Watch a music video with your child and then discuss it with them. What stories are the pictures telling? Does the story on the screen match the meaning to the words in the song? How does the video make your child feel? Can your child note any stereotypical, violent or sexual images in the video?
- Talk to your children about their favourite pop star, for example, Brittany Spears. Ask your child what they admire about her (sings well, great dancing, fit) then ask them about the way she dresses and do they think kids would still admire her if she dressed in jeans and T-shirt? Why? Why not?
- Be sensitive. Children might find it embarrassing for you to discuss sexuality issues in front of their friends and other adults.

- Encourage and support your child's participation in other, non-media related activities.
- Learn more. Surf the web. Websites like www.media-awareness.ca and www.mediafamily.org will help get you started.
- Talk about the issue with other parents informally or in a workshop. Call the Family Transition Place Violence Prevention Program at 941-HELP or 1800-265-9178

**The point is to get children to
THINK and QUESTION
the media they see and play.**

Start today and help your child navigate the media world!

May is Sexual Abuse Prevention Month. This article is one of five that addresses the issue of tween sexuality.

Contact the Violence Prevention Program at Family Transition Place for more information about SAPM activities or other violence prevention services. Phone 941- 4357 or 1-800 265-9178 or visit our website www.familytransitionplace.ca