

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE OF OUR CHILDREN HOLD?

Researcher Says Media Could Influence Sexual Activity Among Teenagers

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Chronicle Staff Writer

As pregnancies continue among even younger and younger women, some professionals think the programs adolescents watch on television and the music they listen to could accelerate their interest in sexual activity.

Joyce Wheeling, coordinator of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Council in Winston-Salem, believes that media reinforces sexual

activity because of its highly sexual content.

"I think some music and television, like MTV (Music Television), does have an influence (on sexual behavior among teens)," she said. "All types of media, including magazines, uses sexuality to sell everything. That adds to the problem."

Barbara Huberman, executive director of the North Carolina Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy (NCCAP) in Charlotte, said the media has a tremendous impact on

adolescent behavior.

"A lot of their influences come from the programs they watch on TV and influences through other forms of the media," she said. "I'm not bashing the media, but they are contributing to the problem."

The media influence on teenage pregnancy was taken serious enough to invite a communication researcher to make a presentation at the council's annual meeting last May.

"Media are important sex educators," said Jane Brown, director of graduate studies in the School of Journalism and Mass Communications at UNC-Chapel Hill. "You bring what you already know to the experience, and some don't have a sophisticated sense. Media could provide a frame of reference for those who don't have it."

Brown contends that kids are more susceptible to sexuality in the media because they "start looking to

complete their sexual scripts."

"The majority get some education after they have already started sex," she said. "Media is constantly suggesting (sex) as an important behavior and puts it high on the agenda."

Brown, who presents her research to Planned Parenthood of the Triad councils across the country annually, cautioned that media images are not interpreted the same way by everyone.

"We often jump to conclusions

that there is one unified effect," Brown said; "but it depends very much on who the viewers are."

Huberman believes that education alone, especially from the media, is not sufficient enough to totally offset the problem.

"Education by itself is not going to change behavior," said Huberman. "Knowledge is one of the most important factors, but this is a complex problem and it will require a complex solution."

Future of Crack Babies Not Bright, Says Medical Professionals

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birth to a child.

"They count 10 toes and 10 fingers (on their babies) and they think it's all right to continue using crack," said Margaret Brown, a substance abuse counselor at Step One who works with drug-abusing mothers.

Crack — the crystallized form of cocaine that is smoked — has plagued inner cities since the mid-1980s when it first surfaced. Over the years it has also become the scourge of suburban and rural areas and smaller-sized cities. As evidence, the *Chronicle* in May reported the story of an infant caught in a custody fight between a crack-using mother and the woman she had given her child to.

Since crack is still considered by health professionals and social workers as relatively new on the scene, little is known of the long-term health affects the drug poses

on infants born to crack-addicted mothers. Health and social workers agree, however, that a crack-addicted woman giving birth could threaten her child's ability later in life to perform normally in some situations, such as classroom settings.

Dr. Robert Dillard, professor of pediatrics at Bowman Gray School of Medicine and director of the neonatal unit at Forsyth Memorial Hospital, said that of the 33 babies at any one time in the neo-natal unit at Forsyth, "three to five" of them are crack babies — and an "overwhelming" number are black.

There is no agency in Forsyth County that keeps records of the number of crack babies born each year, but Dillard said that the problem is acute.

"Just from anecdotal evidence, there's a serious problem in the county," he said.

It's such a common problem, he said, that the hospital does not

report crack babies to Social Services "unless there is something quite pathologic or obvious. We don't refer the majority of the cases we identify," he said.

Surprisingly, Dillard said, many mothers will admit that they had been using crack. The hospital social worker will determine if the case warrants reporting to social services.

The most serious problem that crack poses in the uterus is premature birth, which results in a less-than-normal birth weight and the inability of the immune system to affectively fight off disease, he said. While a baby born to an alcohol-abusing mother has more immediate and detrimental effects, a "crack baby" can soon shake the immediate problems, Dillard said, but what poses the dilemma is how the child is affected later during adolescence.

A premature baby usually signals that a mother is a drug user, Dillard said, and if doctors are suspicious, then a hospital social worker gets involved.

"We make it clear to the mother that we're not policemen," he said. "We're only interested in the well-being of the child. We won't call the police."

Dillard said that if a woman admits to using crack but maintains a job and keeps her children in school, the woman will not be reported to the Department of Social Services. Instead, a hospital social worker may ask that a special nurse be provided to visit the woman's home.

On the other hand, a mother who is homeless and is a heavy drug user will almost certainly be reported to social services, Dillard said.

Brenda Evans, a social work program manager for social services, whose office investigates complaints of child abuse, said that from July 1992 to May of this year, there was a 37 percent rise in the number of drug-related cases over the previous 12 months.

"We don't investigate every case where a parent is on drugs," she said.

If the hospital contacts social services and says that a drug-abusing woman is about to deliver, but that woman is living with her grandmother, said Evans, "we say that that grandmother is a stable enough force" in the household.

In some cases, the mother is confronted with her problem and

told to get treatment or risk losing custody of her child. Every effort is made to avoid removing the child from the parent, Evans said.

Brown, the Step One counselor, said drugs are a serious problem among young African-American mothers.

"The girls who are here are a mere fraction of who are out there," she said.

She was critical of blacks who she said are notorious for not getting help earlier.

"Historically, black people don't do appointments. It's the same thing with crack addicts. When they finally come in for treatment, they're at a crisis point in their lives," she said.

Forsyth Rates High in Teen Pregnancy

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pre-teenage category, 33 of the 36 pregnancies were to African Americans.

Nearly half of the 15- to 19-year-olds who became pregnant in Forsyth County had abortions, while 21 of the 33 black pre-teenagers chose to give birth.

Barbara Huberman, executive director of the North Carolina Coalition on Adolescent Pregnancy (NCCAP), said that over the last 25 years the number of teen-age pregnancies has not shown much increase. Instead, she said, the trend is showing an increasing number of women who are choosing to give birth. Huberman said more youths are giving birth because today's women are not ostracized as much for becoming mothers at an early age.

"It's more acceptable to be a single parent these days," she said. "They are not looked down upon as much, and opposition to having abortions gets a lot of media attention."

Huberman said the high pregnancy rates run across the board, but blacks get most of the media attention because whites opt for abortions. She noted that abortions are less acceptable in black families, citing that two-thirds of white teenagers have abortions compared to only one-third of black teen-agers.

Althea Jones, a volunteer with Planned Parenthood of the Triad, said most black teen-agers decide to have the babies because of their traditional customs of the extended family.

"We're taught to look after one another and take care of our own problems," she said. "Most black families support each other and try to keep it in the family."

Huberman said North Carolina has one of the highest proportion of working mothers, thus leaving the children with a lot of free time. This "unsupervised time" is what Jones says helps contribute to the problem.

"There is the absence of a father figure, and working mothers are trying to provide for the family," she said. "They feel they need attention and something to identify with. Having a baby gives them something that will love them and they can give love back to." Throughout the state, there was a total of 769

pregnancies to 10- to 14-year-olds and 24,299 pregnancies to 15- to 19-year-olds, according to NCCAP.

Joyce Wheeling, coordinator of the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Council, said its goal is to offset the increasing number of pregnancies, especially among pre-teenagers.

"It's a primary concern to prevent adolescent pregnancy, but also to spread an awareness of it," Wheeling said. "Education is the key to prevention."

In African-American communi-

ties, many teen-age women are already sexually active before they receive sex education, Jones said.

"A lot of times the parents either were not equipped or just didn't talk about it," she said. "They thought that talking about it might encourage it, and if they didn't say anything about it, it wouldn't happen. But by the time they get to college, especially first generation college students, it's too late because some are already pregnant."

Axioms like "it's all right for my son, but not my daughter," says

Jones, has kept many young black men sheltered from responsibility.

"This double standard is taking black men away from reality. They contributed to the pregnancy," she said. "If black men are taught (responsibility) from their mothers, we could eliminate a lot of this."

The Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Council is seeking the assistance of parents, businessmen, ministers and all concerned citizens to meet July 13 at 3 p.m. at the Big Brothers/Big Sisters Office at 107 Westdale Ave.

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