

## TV SEX ON THE INCREASE

### Study Shows That Sex Scenes Are On The Rise

By: Mary Rettig and Jenni Parker

Researchers at the Kaiser Family Foundation report that the amount of sexual content on television today is nearly double the amount that was on in 1998.

In Sex on TV 4, a biennial study released by the foundation at a November 9 forum, the emerging wisdom is that TV deals a lot with sex – but addresses the related risks and responsibilities far less often.

Foundation researchers watched about a week's worth of TV and saw nearly 3,800 scenes with sexual content. Their report concludes that about seven out of every ten television shows have some sort of sexual content – and that's excluding news, children's shows and live sports. And during prime-time hours, sex is even more prevalent, with nearly eight in ten shows including sexual content.

According to the study, today's 70 percent of TV shows that include sexual content average 5.0 sexual scenes per hour, as compared to the 64 percent of shows in 2002 that had sexual content and that averaged 4.4 sexual scenes per hour. The contrast is even sharper with the 1998 figures – 56 percent of shows and 3.2 sexual scenes per hour.

Vicki Rideout, a Kaiser Family Foundation vice president who oversaw the study, also observes that fewer shows today include messages about "safe sex" and abstinence. Among shows with any sexual content, only 14 percent included at least one scene with a reference to sexual risks or responsibilities, and this ratio has not changed significantly since 2002.

Dr. Dale Kunkel, a researcher for the project, says Kaiser's research is focused on the public health issues related to sex on television. "In just the past couple of years there's been a significant surge in the research that documents the influence of televised sexual content on teens and young adults," he notes.

Kunkel says one of the Foundation's panelists, a Dr. Rebecca Collins, recently published a longitudinal study of 12-to-17-year-olds. "That study found that watching a lot of sex on TV accelerates the age of first [sexual] intercourse," he says. And according to the Kaiser study, among the top 20 shows most watched by teens, 70 percent include sexual content, and nearly half include sexual behavior.

A growing number of studies on the effects of sexualized television on teens and young adults are showing similar correlations, Kunkel notes. "Researchers at the University of North Carolina just published a study that measures the 'sexual media diet' of seventh- and eighth-graders," he points out, "and they find it's a significant predictor of levels of sexual activity."

Also, the researcher points to a University of Michigan experimental study of college students who watch prime-time shows in which casual sex was presented. He says the investigators found that subjects in the study "became more permissive in their views about sexual encounters, consistent with the program portrayals."

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