

Your Health

Does MTV make adolescents more reckless?

It's no secret that teen-agers often indulge in risky behavior, like having unprotected intercourse, drinking, or driving too fast. Like most parents of teens, I often ask why they take so many chances. Some observers blame the influence of the mass media, with its often



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glamorous portrayals of recklessness and irresponsibility. A new study tested this theory and came up with some fascinating results:

More than 2,750 randomly selected black or white 14- to 16-year-olds from the southeastern United States filled out a survey on risky behavior and media use.

When researchers from the University of Rochester School of Medicine analyzed the results, they found that the kids in the study engaged in a lot of potentially dangerous activities, including drinking alcohol (65 percent of the teen-agers), having sex (39 percent), and smoking cigarettes (31 percent). The researchers divided the respondents into low-risk, moderate-risk and high-risk groups, and then looked for patterns in the different groups' tastes in TV, radio, music and magazines.

After controlling for race, gender and parents' educational level, the researchers

found that the high-risk kids listened to more radio and watched music videos, cartoons and soap operas more often than their peers who took fewer chances. Low-risk teens favored news and public-affairs programs. Risk-taking kids tended to read sports and music magazines and to listen to punk or heavy-metal groups, rather than the soft rock, gospel or soul music preferred by their low-risk counterparts.

I consider these findings quite interesting, but a couple of important questions remain unanswered: Does reading Sports Illustrated and listening to Motley Crue inspire risky behavior? Or do kids who smoke, drink and drive fast naturally gravitate toward this kind of entertainment? A long-term study that follows kids from age 10 to age 20 might shed light on these questions.

For now, public health experts can use this information to pitch important health messages — like why exercise is good or how smoking is dangerous — through the media most likely to reach kids who are at highest risk of hurting themselves.
