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Her Favorite Class: 'Sex' Education

Teenage Girls Love 'Sex and the City.' And Not All Parents Fear It.

By SARAH HEPOLA

ALEXANDRIA DeMuria, who is 14 years old and lives in suburban New Jersey, tuned in after the kids at school started to talk. She remembers her first episode, in which the sexually insatiable Samantha begins dating another woman. "And I was like, 'Mom, you won't believe this.'"

Meanwhile, in Austin, Tex., 18-year-old Rachel Foster has held a viewing party at her house every Sunday night for the last two years. There are a few ground rules: all cell phones off, and no talking. "It's like a church in there," says Stephanie Mansour, 17.

And just outside of Toronto, 16-year-old Carrie Wallace has been hooked for the last year. "You know when you sit there and compare yourself to a TV character?" she writes by email. "I am so Carrie!" She means Carrie Bradshaw, the kicky sex columnist. Like her namesake, this Carrie has a sense of humor and a flair for the fabulous, along with an appreciation of couture she owes to her favorite show. "Before I started watching 'Sex and the City,' I thought Louis Vuitton was a French explorer!" She's joking. "But you get the point."

"Sex and the City" begins its sixth and final season on HBO tonight. Once considered a show for single women and gay men, it has blossomed into a comic fantasia about love in the Big Apple that is enjoyed by straight men, lesbians, women in their 70's and 80's, and

finally, teenage girls. Unlike the current glut of youth-oriented entertainment, "Sex and the City" is not courting a young audience. It's tucked away on premium cable, with a "mature" warning preceding each episode. And maybe that's part of its appeal. By HBO's own figures, girls ages 12 to 17 make up only a sliver of the audience — 93,000 out of more than 6.6 million viewers — but those numbers don't reflect the show's cultural impact on that age group.

"It's just the type of show teen girls flock to," says Dr. Anne Kearney-Cooke, a psychologist who runs the Helping Girls Become Strong Women Project at Columbia University. She says the heroines' glamour and power appeal to girls at an age when they seem to lack those qualities. "I hear girls in my office talking about

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Craig Blankenhorn/HBO

The sexual insatiability of Samantha (Kim Cattrall) is one of the constants on "Sex and the City."

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the show all the time. It's like they want to take on that look — you're drinking a candy-colored cocktail with your friends, you look great and you're a guy magnet. Young girls are susceptible to that because they may have acne, their bodies are changing, they're interested in guys, and most important, they're watching a lot of TV." Dr. Kearney-Cooke dislikes the idea of teen girls watching "Sex and the City," and she isn't alone.

Alexandria's mother, Carol DeMuria, remembers an episode in which Samantha (always Samantha) has sex in a firehouse. "This is not how I want my daughter to live," says Ms. DeMuria, a 45-year-old mother of four. "This is not how I want her to think people in Manhattan live." Although Ms. DeMuria likes the show, and its positive portrayals of gay men, she says the thin, well-heeled heroines don't match her own memories of being single in what can be a tough and bruising city. But more important, she finds the women's gonzo sexcapades and the show's hallmark sexual frankness — discussions of topics like S&M, anal sex and erotic urination — unsuitable for her daughter. "When I was a kid, married people slept in double beds in all the TV shows," says Ms. DeMuria. "Let's be honest, people are having sex and having kids out of wedlock. But what do you tell a 14-year-old, that it's O.K.?"

Two years ago, Todd Leavitt had a similar struggle with "Sex and the City" in his Santa Monica, Calif., home. He remembers literally locking his 12-year-old twin girls in their room while his wife and 18-year-old daughter stayed glued to the set. "It was an interesting dilemma that focused on how great entertainment can be and how inappropriate it can be," he said. He knows all about that — he's the president of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences. Now that his twins are 14, however, he's finally relented. "I can't keep them from watching it because their friends are all watching it. It's become a social phenomenon because it so speaks to them. We don't want to deny them that and make it forbidden fruit."

It's that classic parental question — what can the kids watch and when? — made more urgent by exclamatory reports reminding us that kids aren't just watching more sex on TV, they're having it. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy recently reported that one in five kids under 15 is not a virgin. Even the writers of "Sex and the City" rankled at an article in The New York Times that reported that 13-year-olds in Manhattan were engaging in oral sex. Their response was an episode called "Hot Child in the City," in which a spoiled uptown tween dished with her young friends about her exploits. "You have the rest of your life to talk that way," scolds Samantha, and she should know.

But while some parents forbid their daughters from watching the show, others encourage them, using its candor to educate. In an article which ran in Salon last July, the author and playwright Stephanie Lehmann wrote about watching "Sex and the City" with her

daughter, then 14. She called the show "as thorough a sex primer as you could ever find" and went on to describe how watching it together provided a segue into slippery but necessary sexual discussions. "I mean, what can you do?" Ms. Lehmann says on the phone from her home in Manhattan. "The media is hitting them with so much these days. Have you seen the stuff on MTV?"

Ms. Lehmann's 15-year-old daughter, Maddy Kronovet, said: "It wasn't like I learned how to give a better yadda-yadda, or what's the best vibrator. I learned how women can be stronger about their sex life, because I'd never really seen that. We have problems with guys too — it might not be sex, but it might be lower down on the scale."

In fact, "Sex and the City" has been awarded for its accurate and honest representation of sexuality. The Media Project, a nonprofit organization concerned with the portrayal of adolescent sexuality in entertainment, gave "Sex and the City" a Shine (Sexual Health in Entertainment) award in 2002 for the episode "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," in which Carrie (Sarah Jessica Parker), Samantha (Kim Cattrall) and Charlotte (Kristin Davis) ruefully discuss abortions they've had while Miranda (Cynthia Nixon) grapples with an unwanted pregnancy. The previous year, the episode "Running With Scissors," which finds Carrie torn between lovers, nabbed a nomination. The Media Project's director, Robin Smalley, who has two daughters, 10 and 13, says she wouldn't watch the show with her kids — yet. "But at 14 or 15, I would. Frankly the issues discussed on that show are things that are important to us — how you feel about yourself, how you feel about men, what it's like to be single."

But some children may scoff at the notion of chatting with their folks about one of television's randiest programs. According to Rodger Streitmatter, who teaches a course in "Media and Sexuality" at American University, "When I asked my students if they thought watching the program would allow them to talk to their parents about sex, they responded with a deafening, 'No way!'"

MICHAEL PATRICK KING, an executive producer and the writer of many of the show's most poignant episodes, says: "I just hope that no one gets hurt by what we do because it's done in the total spirit of light and laughter. If there's any legacy I hope we have it's that we've taken the word 'sex' and put bubbles and lights and a little bit of laughter around it, because it's so completely dipped in dark shame that no one even knows how to talk about it, where to talk about it, what to say. The idea that there's a show with the word 'sex' in it that even teenage girls, whom it's not designed for, would want to watch together makes it healthier than sneaking your father's Playboy alone."

Meanwhile, over at Rachel Foster's house in Austin, the girls are gathering for another season. "I think it's so fun because everybody can see themselves in at least one of those girls," says Kasie Wilson, 17. "They're older but they're still really close, like high school girls."

The truth is that the show isn't nearly as racy as it used to be. Last season found the fantastic foursome mired in the realities of motherhood, career frustrations and heartbreak. But that doesn't seem to bother the show's teenage fans one bit.

"It's more like real life," says Kathryn Prickett, 18. "Nothing works out perfectly."

"I kind of look past the sexual parts," says Alexandria. "Unfortunately, that's all my mom sees." Alexandria likes how the show depicts the awkwardness of running into an ex, or how girlfriends can serve as a surrogate family, how women can be opinionated, independent, contradictory, even difficult, and still lovable. And she admits, "Sometimes I just watch it to annoy my mom, you know?"

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Sarah Hepola contributes regularly to themorningnews.org, an online magazine.