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Teens 'overexposed' to media sex

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A federally funded research project has found that children and teens are constantly exposed to sexual images in the media, but warned that no conclusions can be drawn yet about any effects on their sexual attitudes and behavior.

"Our lack of understanding of how this impacts youth is stunning and should scare any parent," said Dr. Joe S. McIlhoney Jr., an Austin, Texas-based physician and president of the Medical Institute for Sexual Health, which conducted the research.

The report, titled "Impact of the Media on Adolescent Sexual Attitudes and Behaviors," was released yesterday and was funded with a \$241,200 grant from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a CDC official said.

The media examined in the research project included television, radio, movies, the Internet, compact discs and video/computer games.

The report found that these forms of entertainment feature extensive sexual imagery and content. "All we really know is that kids are overexposed to sex," Dr. McIlhoney said.

"It's everywhere ... even if they tried, kids can't escape it," he added.

The report noted that several studies suggest a relationship between the sex-saturated media and adolescents' sexual attitudes and practices. But the studies are not conclusive, the medical institute said, because of design, sampling procedures and small sample sizes.

However, the authors pointed out that the mass media "have been shown to affect a broad range of adolescents' attitudes and behaviors, including [increasing] violence, eating disorders, and tobacco and alcohol use."

The report found that the average American youth "spends one-third of each day with various forms of mass media, mostly without parental oversight."

It also found that the average teen watches television three to four hours each day, of which 6.7 scenes for every hour of programming included sexual topics. About 10 percent of those scenes portray couples engaged in sexual intercourse, and one-third of shows with sexual contact involve teen characters.

However, the report said adolescents who are exposed to television with sexual content "are more likely than other adolescents" to have more permissive attitudes toward premarital sex and "to think that having sex is beneficial."

As for movies, the report said two-thirds of the movies Hollywood makes each year are R-rated, and "most young people have viewed these movies before they reach the required age of 16."

The report found that adolescents listen to the radio nearly 40 hours weekly and that more than a fifth of teen-oriented radio segments contain sexual content, of which some is "very explicit." Forty-two percent of the top-selling CDs contain sexual content that is "pretty explicit" or "very explicit."

On average, children ages 9 to 17 use the Internet four days per week and spend almost two hours online at a time. Sixty-one percent of teens using computers "surf the net," and 14 percent "see something they wouldn't want their parents to know about," the report found.