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• Media Contact: Colleen O'Boyle at 703.683.5004

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## Sex and Aggression: The Media Impact on Children

By Kristen Fyfe

Two major new studies link steamy TV shows to teen pregnancy, and violent video games to aggression and hostility in kids.

Given that today's youth spend more time with media than they do anything else except sleep, these findings are profoundly important.

The November issue of *Pediatrics*, the journal of the American Pediatric Association, contained both studies on media impact. "[Does Watching Sex on Television Predict Teen Pregnancy? Findings from a National Longitudinal Survey of Youth](#)," conducted by the Rand Corporation, is the first study to show a correlation between exposure to sexual content on TV and teen pregnancy. [The other study](#), "Longitudinal Effects of Violent Video Games on Aggression in Japan and the United States," was written by Craig A. Anderson, director of Iowa State University's Center for the Study of Violence. Anderson's study showed a correlation between children and teenagers who play violent video games and increased physical aggression months afterward.

Both studies are groundbreaking because they were the first longitudinal studies of media influence on behavior. Longitudinal studies assess the same people over a period of several years, revealing changes in behavior possibly from exposure over time to outside influences. The report on violent video games is especially noteworthy because it includes research from Japan as well as the United States. Previous studies suggesting a link between aggression and video game playing have been countered by the argument that video games are extremely popular in Japan, where aggression is less prevalent. Anderson's study shows aggression rising in Japanese children as well.

Why do these studies matter? Because they add compelling evidence to the mountain of data showing that media consumption affects children's behavior – and American children are media saturated.

Children today spend more time with media than they do on schoolwork or with their parents and friends. And the messages they receive are often far from innocuous.

Just how much media are kids consuming? According to the Kaiser Family Foundation's 2006 report, "[The Media Family](#)":

- 83 percent of children under 6 years old use some form of screen media
- On average they spend 2 hours a day with a television and DVD player, 1 hour with video games, and 50 minutes with a computer
- They watch 4,000 hours of TV before they enter kindergarten
- They are exposed to 20 to 25 acts of violence per hour on Saturday morning TV programs intended for children

In a 2005 study, "[Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18-year-olds](#)," Kaiser found that as children age, they consume much more media.

- Children spend an average 6.5 hours a day with some form of media
- They typically use more than one type of media at a time (for example, listening to music while searching the Internet) which becomes the equivalent of 8.5 hours of media consumption per day.
- TV and music are the dominant media consumed by youth
- Youth spend almost 4 hours a day watching TV.
- They spend 1.75 hours per day listening to music.
- They spend 1 hour per day on the computer in activities other than homework.

[The Washington Post](#) reported that 90 percent of homes in America have some sort of video game system, and the time that children spend playing video games has increased from 4 hours per week in the 1980s to 13 hours per week today, with boys averaging 16 to 18 hours a week.

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- 80 percent of entertainment programming targeting teens contains sexual themes, Dr. Nancy Snyderman reported on the November 3, 2008 broadcast of NBC's *Today*.
- In 2000, 31 percent of children, aged 10-17, reported being exposed to pornography on the Internet (National Public Radio)
- Sex is a dominant theme in Top 20 music lyrics, according to a [report by the Culture and Media Institute](#).
- Sex, violence and profanity have risen dramatically on prime time broadcast television, according to recent reports [by The Parents Television Council](#).
- Playing video games can heighten aggression, according to the [American Psychological Association](#).

### **Media Coverage Skews Toward Sex**

What children consume and how much time they spend in front of screens or on earphones make a difference. So when new studies show how children are negatively impacted by entertainment media, you'd expect the news media to be all over the story. But it seems that sex sells even in research. The two *Pediatrics* studies were released concurrently, but only the sex study got national media attention.

CBS, NBC, CNN and NPR all carried stories on the study linking teen pregnancy to watching TV shows with sexual themes. The study was also featured in *TIME*, wire services provided by the Associated Press and United Press International as well as major daily newspapers including *USA Today*, *The Washington Post* and *The Boston Globe*.

By contrast, no broadcast network mentioned the video game violence study and it was minimally covered by the national print media, notable exceptions being *The Washington Post* and *The Los Angeles Times*. Several regional papers covered both studies.

While teen pregnancy and sex on TV are titillating topics, aggression and hostility are also culturally important. News programs are filled with crime

stories and tales of bullying in schools, so why not dive a little deeper and report on studies that tie aggression to the media?

*Kristen Fyfe is senior writer at the [Culture and Media Institute](#), a division of the Media Research Center.*