

## Tuning in to TV Sex: Using television for dialogue with your children

Most of television is like most of life; the sexual messages are always there, but not always obvious or easily labeled. Look and listen for plots and scenes that address these basic sexuality issues.

There's more to sex than sexuality. Indeed, there's more to a healthy sexuality than sexual behavior. It is all the ways we express what it means to be masculine or feminine in our culture, how we feel about our bodies, what it means to get married, divorced or remain single, to live alone or with friends. Throughout our lives we are sexual beings. Understanding sexuality is essential to our self-image, self-understanding and personal identity, and to the formation of human relationships.

The following questions provide springboards of discussion and dialogue around issues of sexuality and sexual behavior.

When viewing TV in the family setting, look and listen, then express your own wonderings. Sometimes it's more effective to simply muse aloud. Direct questions put kids on the spot; musings let them hear your values and prompts conversation in a non-threatening way.

### **Body Image**

- What do characters' appearance/body sizes say about who they are and how they want to be viewed?
- How do the dress and mannerisms of TV stars affect the way children view themselves and present themselves to the world?
- Is the body or body part used to sell commercial products? How?

### **Emotional Expression**

- How do characters show their feelings for one another?
- Do they touch each other in loving ways? Or exploitative ways?
- Do they discuss their real feelings, or do characters expect others to be mind readers?

### **Sex Roles**

- Are male and female characters limited to behavior or activities by their gender?
- Are females allowed to be as smart and as accomplished as males?
- Are males allowed to be as sensitive and loving as females?
- Can they both be strong, physically and emotionally?

### **Family Relationships**

- In what ways does the family portrayed resemble yours? How is it different? What is its configuration – single parent, step-siblings?
- Who makes the decisions?
- How is respect demonstrated?
- Who does a young character turn to for guidance?

### **Sexual Behavior & Consequences**

- Do characters talk before they act on their sexual desires? Do they discuss possible consequences?
- Are the outcomes of their behavior realistic?
- What is the age of characters involved in sexual situations?
- Does violence play a part in sexual or erotic encounters?

## Keeping it Simple

Talking to your child about TV's every sexual message would require a degree of vigilance few adults possess. The following tips can help you pick your moment.

- **Address both positive and negative messages.** Children quickly build barriers against doom-saying adults. Transform them by asking open-ended questions about your child's view of the issues.
- **Be selective about who is present.** Some youngsters find it embarrassing to discuss sexuality with their parents, especially if their friends are around.
- **Express your opinions.** Your children deserve to know your bottom line as the foundation for embarking on the struggle of determining their own views.
- **Keep discussions informal and fun.** Take a lesson from TV – during the commercial break, deliver your own 30-second message to get some thinking started on what's being communicated.
- **Don't expect a sudden bust of insight.** Just because you don't get a thoughtful response doesn't mean you haven't been heard.

But if you regularly offer provocative questions and observations, you will nurture the critical thinking that will help your children question for themselves the messages implicit in the media.