IMPACT ON CHILDREN OF VIEWING SEXUALLY EXPLICIT MATERIAL

Today, children have tremendous access to information via the Internet, television, music videos, advertisements, and other emerging technologies.

Never before have parents and professionals been more concerned about children's exposure to sexually explicit material and the impacts on their healthy sexual development.

Much of the messaging in current pop culture promotes the normalization of harmful sexual behavior.

What Does The Research Tell Us?

Research suggests that early exposure to sexually explicit material is likely to have a negative influence on children.

Children process sexually explicit information differently than adults do.
In the past, it was thought that children simply didn't understand sexually explicit information and therefore were unaffected by exposure.

Children are generally concrete thinkers and do not have complex abstract thinking capabilities.

Research now shows that although they are incapable of processing the information, they may store it and continue to be reminded of it as they grow older.

How are children exposed to sexually explicit content?

1. Accidentally

➢ Children may accidentally come across sexually explicit content on the television or Internet, etc.

➢ When this happens, the image may affect the child before they determine it is inappropriate. Prior to removing themselves from the situation (turning off the television or computer) the image has reached their brain and made an impact.

➢ The residue from the image may last longer for some children than for others. While some will experience signs of stress, others will never think about it again. There are children that may be curious to seek more information that is increasingly explicit.

2. Intentionally (Curious)

➢ Adolescents are naturally curious about sex and often turn to the Internet to seek information or to someone who may lead them to it. As Internet content is typically uncensored, children can be exposed to harmful material.

➢ Sexually explicit content may present new ideas, which in turn may influence a child's development of values and perception of healthy sexual relationships.

➢ The purpose of this sheet is to provide parents and educators with background information about potential impacts on children viewing sexually explicit material.

➢ This sheet is intended to offer information promoting healthy child sexual development and to bridge discussion with children about negative media messages.

Impact of Viewing Sexually Explicit Material

➢ The sexually explicit information found on the Internet is often inaccurate and harmful. It can represent violence and the dehumanization of individuals in sexual scenes.

➢ According to experts, this type of information can form powerful, but false ideas about healthy sexuality.

➢ It often lacks descriptions of intimacy or the development of deep personal relationships. Rather, it encourages sexual acts without any emotional connection.

What are possible impacts of overexposure to

sexually explicit content?

➢ May begin to shape sexual values, attitudes and behaviors

➢ May prematurely sexualize children

➢ May incite them to experiment with sexually explicit behavior

➢ May increase social acceptance of high risk behavior

➢ May change expectations of relationships, physical appearance and behavior

➢ May increase risk of victimization, as personal boundaries can be blurred

➢ May increase health risks (e.g. sexually transmitted diseases, exploitation)

➢ May increase risk of problematic sexual behavior against other children

➢ May interfere with healthy sexual development

What Can Parents Do?

In today's pop culture children are exposed to a multitude of sexual messages through mass media: television, music, Internet, and advertisement. It is important to help children develop critical thinking skills using age-appropriate information.

This can be fostered through:

➢ Becoming aware of what children are viewing and playing

➢ Setting limits on what children are allowed to view and play (e.g. Internet, television and video games)

➢ Supervising children online and offline (know what they are doing, find out what they are interested in)

➢ Setting up content filtering on search engines:
  • Go to search engine
  • Click on Advanced Search and Preferences
  • Click on filter using Safe Search

➢ Checking for availability of parental viewing controls with your Internet service provider

➢ Explaining media's false representation of relationships

➢ Talking openly about the hidden negative messages in media, music, fashion, advertising (e.g. Glorification of violence, sexual harm, power and control, and stereotypes)

➢ Providing perspective about healthy relationships and healthy sexuality that children can use when trying to make sense of mass media messages

➢ Fostering healthy body image

➢ Fostering gender identity
  • Various levels of relationships (e.g. Acquaintance, intimate, sexual)
  • Love vs. control (cooperative vs. coercive relationships)
  • Rights and responsibilities of sexual behavior
  • Health risks associated with sexual activity
  • Dignity and respect (the importance of self-worth)