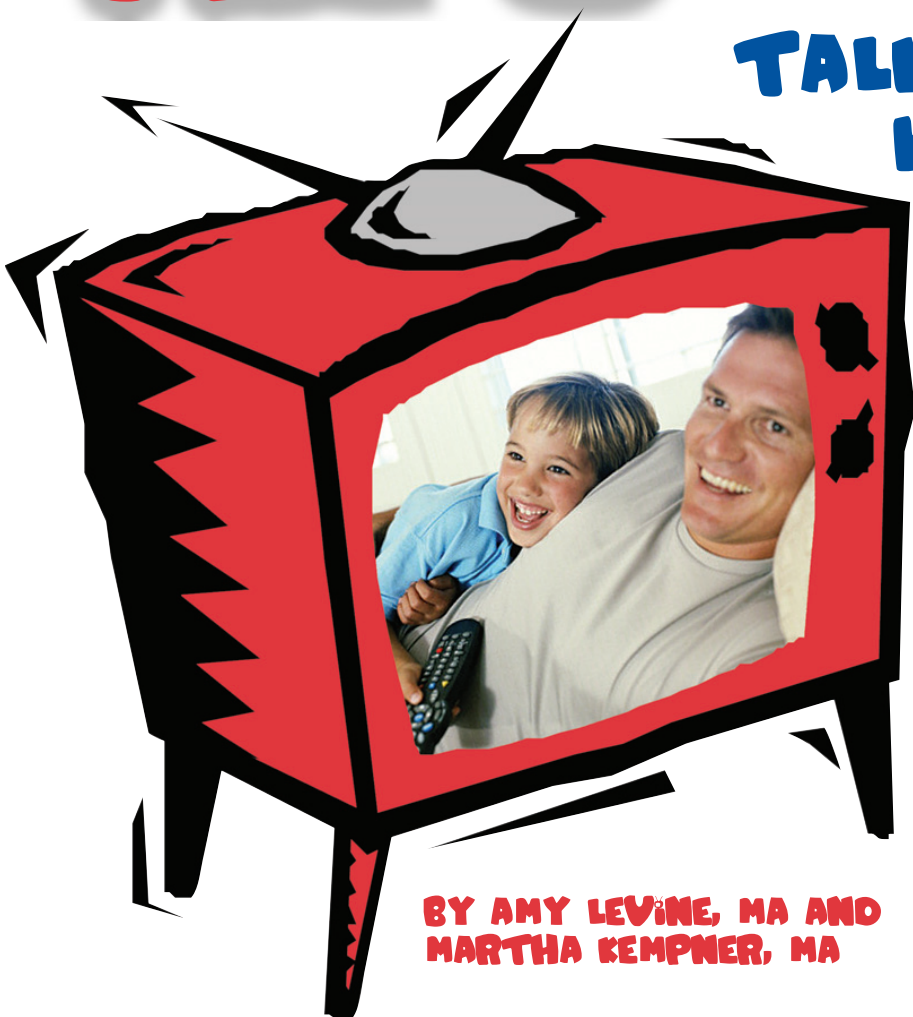


ON THE TUBE

TALKING WITH KIDS ABOUT WHAT THEY SEE ON TV



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On Sunday, February 1, 2004, millions of people tuned in to watch the Carolina Panthers face the New England Patriots in Super Bowl XXXVIII. Families all across the country gathered around the television with pizza, popcorn, soda and chips to watch the game, enjoy the million-dollar ads and have a good time together.

Many parents brushed up on their football statistics and were prepared to discuss quarterback ratings, running yards and third-down conversions. Few parents realized, however, that sexuality would take center stage and many felt unsure of what to do.

Since the Super Bowl aired, there have been many public discussions about what we saw. Most of them have focused on the two seconds of nudity that surprised everyone. The truth is, however, that messages about sexuality, gender and relationships were present throughout the evening— from the half-time show which featured suggestive lyrics and racy dance moves, to the commercials which discussed erectile dysfunction, to the game itself which portrayed one image of what it means to be masculine.

Instead of being afraid to turn on the television, parents should be prepared to use television programming as teachable moments— daily opportunities that occur when you are with your children that make it easier to share your messages and values.

SOME TIPS TO GET STARTED

1. Take the opportunity to share your values. Television— news, commercials, sporting events, nighttime soap operas or music videos— provides daily opportunities to spark conversations about sexuality. Use these opportunities to explore your values and share them with your children.

2. Remind yourself that it is okay to be uncomfortable. As a parent, you know how important it is to talk with your children about sexuality, but often times this is easier said than done. It's okay to feel embarrassed; the most important thing is that your children know you are there for them. And it is okay if you don't have all the answers because you can always look them up on your own or with your children.

3. Ask your children what they think. Your children are bombarded by messages about sexuality everyday. You can help them sort through these messages. Simply asking your children, "What do you think about what we just saw?" is a great way to start a conversation while watching television. Even "bad" shows can provide good opportunities.

4. Listen to what your children have to say. Letting your children know that you value their input is key to creating open lines of communication. Listening to their comments and questions will not only give you insight into what they already know but it will also help you understand what they need from you.

5. Be ask-able. Discussing what is on television is just one of the many ways to have ongoing conversations about sexuality with your children. Let your children know that you are always available to answer questions, talk through difficult issues and support them as they grow up.

SHARING MESSAGES ABOUT THE MEDIA

Television can bring up many issues about sexuality whether you are watching a teen drama that addresses dating, a sitcom that jokes about sexual orientation, a commercial that makes you question gender roles, or a news program that covers the most recent celebrity or local "sex-scandal." The following are some messages that can help young people understand the role the media plays in our lives.

Messages for Young People Ages 5-8:

- Some of the material on television, in the movies, in books and magazines, on radio and on the Internet is true and some is not.
- Some commercials try to make people and things look different and better than they really are.
- Some television programs, movies and computer forums are not appropriate for young children.

Messages For Young People Ages 9-12:

- People can refuse to watch, read and/or listen to anything that offends them.
- Parents have the right to determine what is appropriate viewing material for their own children.
- No one really looks as perfect in real life as certain actors and actresses appear in the media.
- The media often present an unrealistic image of what it means to be male or female, what it means to be in love, and what parenthood and marriage are like.
- The media sometimes negatively portrays certain cultural groups.
- The media can influence the way people think and behave.
- A parent or trusted adult can help when media messages are confusing.

Amy Levine, MA, is the Family Project coordinator and Martha Kempner, MA, is the director of Public Information at SIECUS, the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States. For more information about talking with your kids about sexuality-related issues, visit www.familiesaretalking.org.