



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 19, 2013

## Study Shows TV's Increased Sexual Exploitation of Teen Girls

A new study released by the [Parents Television Council](#) (PTC), a pro-family group that monitors cable and broadcast TV networks, demonstrates the increasing sexual exploitation of teen girls as characters on prime-time television programs. The study, part of PTC's "[4 Every Girl](#)" campaign, found that underage female characters are more likely to be presented in scenes that are sexually exploitative than are adult female characters, with the majority of those scenes presenting the exploited teens in a humorous manner.



Out of nearly 240 episodes the group looked at during the study period that extended from 2011-12, 63 percent (150 episodes) featured sexualized content in scenes that were associated with female characters, and 33 of the episodes included sexual content that researchers said was sexually exploitative.

□However, the likelihood of the sexual exploitation being considered humorous increased to 43 percent when it involved underage female characters. According to the report, content that targeted underage girls and was presented as humorous included such things as child molestation, sex trafficking, sexual harassment, pornography, and disrobing.

"Sexually exploiting minors on TV — especially for laughs — is grotesquely irresponsible," said PTC President Tim Winter. He said that "the frequency with which viewers are able to watch and laugh at these sexually exploitative situations supports the notion that entertainment media is creating an environment that encourages and even facilitates the sexualization of women. When we laugh about dead hookers, it becomes increasingly difficult to see the mistreatment of sex workers as a national civil and human rights issue. The same can be said for child molestation or sex trafficking."

While the study found that adult female characters were more likely to engage in sexualized dialogue or activities in their scenes, the likelihood that a scene would include sexual exploitation was higher if the female characters were teen or pre-teen girls. Among the studies other findings:

- The likelihood that a scene would include sexual exploitation was highest when the female characters were underage (over 23 percent of the scenes).
  - Sexually exploitative topics targeting underage girls were more likely to be humorous (nearly 43 percent of the scenes) compared to those targeting adult women (33. percent).
  - 37 percent of all sexual exploitation observed during the study period was intended to be humorous.
- Winter said that the trivialization of sexually exploiting women — especially teen girls — by networks could easily be interpreted as sanctioning the sexualization of women. "When these messages, images and ideologies are delivered via mass media, the definition of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors are communicated both implicitly and explicitly to viewers," he charged. "Similarly, when the media associates humor with sexual exploitation they are sending a strong message that these issues are harmless and require neither urgency nor a strong response."



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[Holly Austin Smith](#), a survivor of child trafficking who speaks and writes widely on the issue, said the importance of the PTC research could not be over-emphasized. She recalled that the sexualized content she absorbed through prime-time television as a young girl over twenty years ago made it difficult for her to resist the sexual abuse she ultimately suffered.

"I was raised with a TV in my bedroom, and I literally studied people on the screen for clues about the world and about my place in the world," Smith recalled. By the age of twelve she had been sexually exploited multiple times by high schools boys, and, she said, "what's most disturbing is that when these assaults occurred I had no idea that I had been assaulted. I thought these acts were part of teenage dating. I literally had no idea that saying no was an option; I never saw a girl say no on television and be respected for her decision."

By the time she was in middle school, Smith said, she had already been sufficiently broken by the media messages concerning sex, so that she was easy prey to a sex trafficker who met her in a local shopping mall and lured her into a life of forced prostitution. "My transition from middle school to prostitution was seamless because of all that I had already learned from the media and the effects of these lessons," she said. "I believed my value was based on my sexual appeal to older boys and men, which resulted in sexualization and numerous acts of sexual exploitation."

She noted that the sexualized content on TV has become much worse than it was in the 1990s when she was impacted by it, as cited by the PTC report. "Those girls who are most influenced by the media are also most at risk for sexual exploitation, including sex trafficking," she said, adding that "negative messages in the media, including the sexual objectification of women, create a climate which supports the tactics of sexual predators. Sex traffickers understand how these messages influence vulnerable children, and they are using it to their advantage."

The PTC's Tim Winter emphasized that his group's study exposes "a very real problem of teen girls being shown in sexually exploitative situations on TV," made even worse by the fact that these atrocities are often presented as humorous. "We hope that these disturbing findings will spur concern, increased dialogue, and a collective responsibility to find answers that will result in a qualitative difference in the lives of young girls and women everywhere."

Click here to view the entire PTC Report: [Teen Sexual Exploitation](#).



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