

NUDITY ON SCREEN, YOUTH AND HARM

Literature Review: Impacts on children and young people of exposure to nudity on television and other media (The Collaborative Trust, 2019)

BSA commissioned research to explore how depictions of nudity in different on screen scenarios may impact or harm children and young people. The BSA wanted to know what potential harms arise, and how broadcasters, the BSA, and parents and caregivers can mitigate such harms and support youth as they navigate the pervasive media environment.

The Collaborative for Research and Training in Youth Health and Development (The Collaborative Trust) undertook a literature based study to explore the impact of visual images of nudity on screen in different contexts on children (age 0-14 years) and young people (age 15-17).

The research found that there are a limited number of studies that refer to nudity on television and its impact on children and young people. The following nudity contexts were explored:

- **Family environment:** Studies about children watching nude content in the family environment, indicated that children feel curious and uncomfortable and want parents to explain the images to them.
- **Educational content:** Some studies found that nudity on screen that is educational, eg depicted in a medicalised context, could provide a positive context for sexuality education.
- **Nudity in art:** A small number of studies looked at nudity in the artistic context and proposed that nudity in art and popular culture can help to reframe nudity as a positive discourse.
- **Sexual context:** Studies into sexual media content looked at impacts of exposure and, being the most prevalent, were the focus of the research report.

NUDITY/SEXUAL MEDIA CONTENT ON SCREEN AND HARM

The empirical literature is divided as to whether exposure to sexual media content (which some researchers refer to as sexy media) leads to harmful impacts on children and young people. Some studies found no link between exposure to sexual media content and harm in children and young people, but a large number of studies concluded that exposure to sexual media content (including naked images) impacts on the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people. Findings include:

- Exposure to sexual media content is more risky where it starts at a very early age, is frequent, prolonged or continually outweighs other more positive activities.
- Children use media sources to learn about sexuality. There can be positive and negative impacts from this.

- Such media may lead children to regard that content as normative, shaping their own attitudes and perceptions of sexual reality. This may result in youth having more permissive sexual attitudes or increased estimates of sexual activity among their peers that match what they see on screen.
- Many studies suggest sexual media content can affect children's attitudes and healthy development and increase sexual risk taking (including through early sexual activity, casual sex and/or tendency to have several sexual partners).
- However, some studies suggest variables such as influence of parents/peers, or parental-adolescent conflict have more impact on children's sexual behaviour and attitudes than media.
- One study found that watching sexualised media content led to sex being a less taboo subject with young people more able to openly talk and think about what they had seen. In that way exposure to such content did not lead to harm, but could even be seen as positive.
- The majority of studies conclude that exposure to pornographic images (defined as content with the purpose of sexual arousal) has negative effects for children.
- Studies referred to children experiencing enduring feelings of shock, disgust or embarrassment when viewing sexual media content inadvertently.
- Such media may impact sexual attitudes, for example, promoting the idea that sexually attractive has to be slim or muscular. This may lead to harmful behaviours such as eating disorders.
- There is evidence that some adolescents are thoughtful and discerning in their media choices and are able to determine what is appropriate (and realistic) content and what is not. They were able to separate what they saw on television or online from reality.

PARENTS/CAREGIVERS

- Parents/caregivers tend to be more concerned about sexually explicit nudity (rather than nudity in a non-sexual context).
- Parents/caregivers play an important role in monitoring children's viewing habits but are often reluctant to talk about nudity/sexual content (as opposed to violence).
- One study indicated that youth whose parents did not monitor their viewing had more frequent exposure to sexual scenes on television.

DIFFERENT CULTURES, DIFFERENT IMPACTS

- There is some variation in impacts for children across cultures.
- Children's physical appearance standards, sexual beliefs and behaviours are influenced by role models from media/TV who are similar in ethnicity/gender.

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AND LIMITING HARM

- Key changes to the brain occur around puberty (between 8 – 16 yrs) so healthy brain development can be impacted by experiences at this time. Care should be taken to ensure experiences provide healthy stimuli.
- Healthy development occurs within a context of connected family/whanau and communities. Parental support is very important in supporting healthy changes in the brain.

- Children need the skills and resources to be able to critically view information and use it positively (eg for their own sexual education).
- Where exposure to nudity might be perceived as risky, harm will be mitigated if the exposure occurs in a supportive environment where the child or young person feels able to talk about what they have seen or to make sense of it in a way that is meaningful to them.
- The education offered by parents/caregivers and schools is important to counter some of the inappropriate messages children could receive from sexual media content.
- Parents/caregivers can help by developing better media literacy and a better understanding of their children's experiences with media, especially their digital media world.
- It is important for adults to understand what media young people are viewing as part of their sexual education.
- The use of monitoring, filters, guidelines and restrictions around media use in the home can limit the exposure to, and consequent impacts of, nudity and sexual related media on youth.
- Parents are encouraged to emphasise the positive aspects of sexuality, such as the love and respect angle of relationships.
- When children are given the opportunity to be honest about their concerns, fears and curiosities this helps break the taboo around morality and social appropriateness.
- Several researchers advocate parents and educators being less reactive to and risk focused around sexual content and media. They recommend developing positive strategies that recognise the pervasive nature of media in young people's lives and finding opportunities for education.

The Collaborative Trust's full report is available on the BSA's website (www.bsa.govt.nz).

The BSA has identified a number of actions that broadcasters, parents/caregivers and the BSA (and other agencies) can take to respond to these findings. The suggestions are [below](#).

Actions for Broadcasters, Parents/Caregivers and BSA

Broadcasters/Content producers

- Sexual media content impacts young people. Broadcasters can mitigate the risks of harm by ensuring that careful consideration is given to classifications, use of warnings, programming and suitable programme descriptions so parents and caregivers can understand and make informed decisions about what their families may access.
- Sexual media content is a continuum from touching to kissing, to foreplay, to intercourse. Consider the range in classification assessments and age appropriateness of content.
- Such media has impacts beyond entertainment. It changes attitudes and behaviours, particularly in young people, so take this into account when considering the audience the content is being produced for.
- Cultural attitudes are relevant.
- Television programmers – consider time for scheduling content with nudity and sexual material – what accidental viewing might occur? How can harm be mitigated?
- Information regarding support networks available to children and young people can usefully follow programmes with challenging content. This is particularly useful for those viewers who may not live in a supportive home environment.

Parents and Caregivers

- Think about the impact that nudity and sexual material may have on your child – what is their developmental state, experience, understanding? Is the content right for them?
- Support them to understand media – fictional relationships vs reality, amplified conduct. Talk to them about the issues arising in programmes.
- Mediate and monitor children's engagement with and access to nudity and sexual content in your homes – across all media.
- Use tools to manage or restrict content such as parental locks, programme guides, classifications and warnings.

BSA (And other Agencies)

- Encourage and educate broadcasters and content distributors to undertake the mitigating steps above.
- Provide resources for parents and caregivers, including through information sessions with schools.
- Contribute to media literacy through education and information to support healthy engagement with nudity on screen and sexual media content.
- Understand different impacts of nudity on screen and sexual media content on different cultural groups in NZ and develop resources that are designed with these differences in mind.
- Take findings into account in assessment of harm raised in complaints under standards or classification decisions.
- Share findings with other agencies who operate to support families, young people and children navigating the pervasive content environment.
- Consider research in the areas where there are gaps in New Zealand: understanding the impact of nudity and sexual media content in Māori/Pasifika communities, understanding children and young peoples' views on the impact of such media.
- Where possible, collaborate to develop a body of data that can guide all agencies that seek to protect children and young people from harm, and to equip parents and caregivers with tools to help them manage nudity and sexual media content on screen to which their kids are exposed.