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Sex in Movies Correlates to Sexualized Adolescents, Research Shows

A new study out of Dartmouth College confirms what savvy parents have known for years: Hollywood movies are sexually charged, and that fact negatively impacts teenagers who watch them. The study by psychological researchers at Dartmouth and published in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, found that youth who regularly view movies with sexual content have a greater tendency to begin engaging in sexual activity at a younger age, have more casual sexual partners, and engage in what the researchers referred to as “unsafe sexual practices” — e.g., having sex without a condom.



“Much research has shown that adolescents’ sexual attitudes and behaviors are influenced by media,” said Ross O’Hara, the lead researcher in the study. “But the role of movies has been somewhat neglected, despite other findings that movies are more influential than TV or music.”

Prior to the study, O’Hara and his fellow Dartmouth researchers surveyed nearly 700 of the top-grossing movies from 1998 to 2004, rating the movies for sexual content ranging from heavy kissing to sexual intercourse. They then recruited 1,228 adolescent participants between the ages of 12 and 14, asking them to report on the movies they had seen from collections of 50 randomly chosen titles. After six years the youth were surveyed on whether or not they were sexually active, when they became sexually active, how many partners they had, and the level of risk of their sexual activity. According to O’Hara, the research found that those youth who had been exposed to sexual content in movies tended to be more highly sexualized than those who are sheltered from such content.

“Adolescents who are exposed to more sexual content in movies start having sex at younger ages, have more sexual partners, and are less likely to use condoms with casual sexual partners,” said O’Hara. It’s little wonder that Hollywood movies have such an impact on young people. In analyzing films over the past six decades, the researchers found that among Hollywood films produced between 1950 to 2006 around 85 percent contained sexual content. By Hollywood ratings, 88 percent of R-rated movies had sexual content, 85 percent of PG-13 movies, 82 percent of PG-rated movies, and, surprisingly, 68 percent of G-rated films.

The researchers found that sexually explicit content has increased steadily over the past decade for both PG-13-rated and R-rated movies. They also found that 70 percent of the sexual acts depicted in movies from 1983 to 2003 occurred between newly acquainted partners and 89 percent of those sexual acts resulted in no consequences.

As examples of how sexual content can be slipped into movies that many consider “harmless,” the researchers noted that *The Princess Diaries*, which has a “G” rating, includes 42 seconds of sexual content, while the PG-13 movie *Meet Joe Black* has 170 seconds, and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, also



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rated PG-13, sports 78 seconds of sexual content.

“Impressionable children and teens are influenced by the media they consume,” said Melissa Henson of the Parents Television Council, which monitors television shows, movies, and other media for content that may negatively impact children and families. “Over 60 years of research and over 3,000 studies now have linked violent media content and aggression, cigarette smoking in films and the likelihood teens will take up smoking, and more recently, exposure to sexual content in entertainment and early onset of sexual activity in teens.

In attempting to explain why films have such a profound effect on adolescents, O’Hara noted that one trait that seems to be predominant in children ages five to fifteen is “sensation seeking,” which prompts them to seek out various types of intense stimuli. When this is combined with “wild hormone surges,” he said, the research showed that sexual content in movies induced an increase in sensation seeking. “I found that the most surprising part of these results were that adolescents who viewed more sexual content from movies reported higher sensation seeking during their teenage years,” O’Hara told [Fox News](#). “Not only did this higher level of sensation seeking predict an earlier age of sexual debut and riskier sexual behavior, but could have important implications for other risk behaviors, like alcohol use or smoking.”

O’Hara advised that while it is nearly impossible to entirely shield adolescents from overtly sexualized media, there are some steps parents can take to steer them away from questionable or downright objectionable movies. “First, monitor the content of movies that children watch, both in theaters and through other outlets, such as TV and the Internet,” he told Fox News. “Second, discuss the sexual events portrayed in films with your children when they see them. We as adults know what elements of sex scenes are unrealistic or omitted, but we need to relay that information to young people who might not understand how that scene differs from real life.”

But Richard Ross, professor of student ministry at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, told [Baptist Press News](#) that merely navigating kids through the experiences of bad movies and media, without offering an alternative, is like fighting half a battle. “What teenagers most need is a new set of ‘movies,’” said Ross. “The Bible is the ‘novel.’ Teenagers need to read and study the book, absolutely. But they also need to see the ‘movie’ based on the book. They need Mom and Dad and their leaders to live out — in high definition — what life looks like based on the book.”

Addressing specifically Christian families, Ross said “if we only prohibit bad movies, we leave a vacuum. We need to replace them with ‘movies’ that star parents and leaders who reveal what it means to love God, to love others, and to join Christ in bringing His Kingdom on earth.”



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