

Sex Incognito: Disguising Adult Themes in Children's Entertainment

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According to B.A. Robinson, 63% of American youth age 14 – 21 are sexually active (Robinson). According to the Child Welfare League of America, one in three females 15 years of age are sexually active, and one in four boys of the same age are sexually active (Pregnant). What does this mean? It means that people are having sex at a young age, and in significant percentages. While teen sex rates and pregnancy rates in America have declined slightly over the last decade, they are still the highest among western industrialized societies (Fact). These statistics indicate that America's youth are experimenting with sex, and they are doing so at younger and younger ages. Why is this happening? There isn't a simple answer to that question, no one factor that can be singled out; rather, there are various elements at work within our society that contribute to a relaxed moral and sexual environment. Elements like television programming, video games, and children's toys/products are just a few that often have imagery and content that is sexually suggestive and adult in nature.

One of my favorite shows, *The Family Guy*, is an animated series that comes on The Cartoon Network. While this show is a cartoon, and comes on a network that is often considered a kid's network, it has very adult themes and language. Often sexual situations are presented or alluded to in some way. My daughter frequently watches the cartoon network, and I never thought that I needed to monitor her viewing on that particular channel. Come on, it's named the "Cartoon Network". I remember growing up that cartoons were funny, entertaining, and generally harmless forms of entertainment. That was then however. While many cartoons still fit this general sort of criteria, others are clearly intended for a more mature audience, as is the case with *The Family Guy*. Admittedly, this and some other shows come on during the network's "Adult Swim" hour, which is prefaced with a warning/disclaimer about the content of the programming; however, this same program,

and one other called *Futurama*, which is also intended for more mature audiences, can also be seen at other various times during the day.

It's not just the images that sometimes meet the criteria for being mature, it is also the elevated nature of the humor as well. I'll often watch some of the shows on The Cartoon Network with my daughter, and many times I notice images and themes that only a more mature viewer would get, at least on a conscious level. One of the characters on another of my daughter's favorite programs is named "Sara Bellum". To my daughter, that is nothing more than a name, but to someone a little older, this is a play on words. The cerebellum is part of the human brain. The name "Sara Bellum" infers something about this character. In this case the inference is positive, the character is intelligent, but when the character is taken in context with her situation, a different sort of message emerges. Sara Bellum is the secretary for the Mayor of Townsville, aptly named "Mayor". Mayor is an inept sort of character, and functions as more of a figurehead than anything else. All of the real problem solving within the government is done by Miss Bellum. She's the brains. This isn't a bad thing, right? Considering that Miss Bellum is clearly the brains of the operation, yet she is confined to a subservient role under an inept male figurehead, it's not entirely a good thing. You can be a smart woman, but you're only good for certain jobs and duties, and they don't include being in charge. This example may not be specifically sexual in nature, but it illustrates how mature ideas and themes can be easily presented under the disguise of the harmless cartoon. Furthermore, it should be clear that "harmless" cartoons can contain stereotypical images imbedded within them.

The previous examples illustrate how sexual messages and gender stereotypes are easily disguised in what is traditionally considered children's programming –cartoons-. Really though, do kids watch enough television to merit concern about these

issues? According to the American Academy of Pediatrics they do. American youth spend 21-22 hours per week in front of the tube, and American teens spend over 23 hours a week watching television as well. That's a whole day per week! By the time today's kids reach 70 they'll have spent 7-10 years of their lives in front of the TV (American). Do the math and it's apparent that kids are spending a significant portion of each day in front of their television sets, so the types of programs and messages they are experiencing have the potential exert a great amount of influence over the opinions they form about themselves and the activities they feel are acceptable and normal behavior, and this certainly includes ideas about sexual activity. However, television isn't the only medium through which kids are exposed to sexual imagery and suggestions.

My daughter has a Nintendo Gamecube, and I recently considered buying her a game called *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4*. When I shared this idea with my fiancée, she was quick to point out to me that within the story of the game, women can be seen pole dancing and in other negatively stereotyped roles. I argued that it was only a game, but days later after reflection I had a slightly different opinion. Suppose the game had explicit nudity in it? Would it still be okay for my 7 year old daughter to play the game then? It would still be "just a game", because it comes wrapped in the package that is known as "game". Because our association with the idea of "game" is one of fun and play, it is easy for potentially harmful ideas and messages to slip by what would normally be considered good parents. So back to the question; would it be okay for my daughter to play the game if it had explicit nudity? Obviously not, so why then would it be okay for her to play a game that has women in scant clothing dancing in an obviously provocative manner? At first, I didn't even consider the games rating, or what type of images it might contain. I simply thought that it was a video game, a skateboarding video game. She has *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 1* on her Nintendo 64, and she likes that game a lot. We often play it together, so why should this new version be any different?

This is exactly the type of mindset that developers of games, TV shows, and toys use to

market and sell their products. "It's just a game. It's a cartoon. Come on, it's a toy." I consider myself above average in the intelligence department, but that's the exact same mindset I displayed myself concerning the game I wanted to buy for my daughter. Yet the fact of the matter is that the game does contain sexually suggestive images. Many new cartoons do have adult themes. Some toys do reinforce stereotypes, often negative. Miss Bellum can be smart and beautiful, as long as she's subservient to a man, even an inept man who is far less skilled or capable than she is.

Toys are another way in which negative stereotypes and sexual images can be transmitted to kids. For her 7th birthday, my daughter got a *Bratz* doll. This is a doll similar to a *Barbie* doll, but more contemporary, more hip and urban. *Bratz* dolls are dressed in hip clothes, which sometimes means more revealing than in years past, though that in itself isn't necessarily negative. Even *Barbie* can be seen sporting a bikini. What could be considered slightly more provocative however is the fact that these dolls, which are targeted at preteen girls, wear what some would consider excessive makeup and come packaged with their own "corner" to hang out on. Now perhaps hanging out on the corner has gained a more positive connotation than when I was a youth, and I'm simply not up to date, but when I was growing up if you were a girl that was said to be hanging out on the corner, that would have some negative inferences attached to it: you were a slut, a whore, or easy to have sex with. Whether or not this was true, it was the connotation that was attached to the idea of "hanging out on the corner." These dolls promote the idea of hanging out on the corner as being normal. This example may not be as bad as my interpretation suggests, but consider what is taking place: the toy is making a once negative social concept mainstream and cool. In this same fashion, TV shows, toys, and games can also promote formerly negative ideals, like promiscuity, as cool, hip, and socially acceptable.

I'm not trying to suggest that owning a *Bratz* doll, playing *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4*, or watching *The Family Guy* will ultimately lead to a life of sexual promiscuity or lead children down a path of stereotyped doom. What I am suggesting is that a child's environment is full of images and objects that

in one way or another can work to reinforce negative gender ideals and promote the idea that sex is okay and that it's socially acceptable at any age, whether you're in a committed relationship or if it's just a one night stand. Even if the programming, game, or toy isn't explicitly sexually suggestive, or even moderately sexually suggestive, it can still contribute to a morally relaxed environment or mindset that can be a gateway into more promiscuous types of activity.

Take for example the recent public breakup of *Barbie* and *Ken*. For decades, *Barbie* and *Ken* have been together. Now, they're breaking up, but they're still going to be "friends". While there is no "official" reason being offered for the breakup by Mattel, the company that makes *Barbie*, it is suggested that a "single" *Barbie* is more marketable and will be better for sales, especially the new surfer style *Cali Barbie* (O'Connell). There is absolutely nothing wrong with being single. Promoting a single *Barbie* in and of itself isn't a bad thing. The danger here lies in the fact that *Barbie* and *Ken* have a longstanding relationship, 43 years to be exact. But because being single is better right now, the relationship is cast aside. Translation: If your relationship becomes an inconvenience, just get out of it. Commitments are fine, as long as they don't interfere with what **I** want. No need to compromise, no point in **working** at relationships, because they should be easy, and never require real commitment. I might be stretching this analogy a little here, but again I hope the message is clear. *Barbie* is an institution in American society. *Barbie* has been a model for social norms for several decades now. Girls play pretend with *Barbie*; they dress up as *Barbie* on Halloween. They emulate *Barbie*. My daughter still dresses up in her *Barbie Bride* costume she got for Halloween two years ago.

With all of the opinions above being said, it is important to make clear that *Barbie* is a toy; *The Family Guy* is a fictional, animated show; Miss Bellum is a fictional character in a fictional world; *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4* is a game. These things are all fictional creations and are not the real world. They are however **representations** of the world that, to a young mind in the absence of proper guidance, could be perceived as accurate representations of the world around them, or at the least accurate

representations of how the world **should** be. Rational adults can make this distinction, or at least that is the hope. My seven year old daughter however, no matter how intelligent I think she is, could see any of these examples as reality if **I** don't take the time to show her the difference, and even then I need to do so constantly because the other factors in her world (TV, Games, and Toys) are constantly addressing her with their realities. Millions of children across the nation could take the images they see during their 2 to 4 hours of daily TV viewing as reality, whether they're really real or not. Keep in mind that all of the examples I've used are pretty tame and can be found in places that are often considered safe for kids. "It's a cartoon. It's just a game. It's a toy." There are far more examples of shows that are as easily available on other networks. Ever watch MTV's Spring Break Shows? They border on soft core pornography at times.

So how do we protect our children from these mediums that have the potential to reinforce negative stereotypes and relaxed sexual practices? By taking an active and **informed** role in their lives is how. I consider myself a pretty good parent, but I have to admit I am often guilty of not monitoring my child's viewing habits as closely as I should. My fiancée scolds me when I still allow my daughter to watch *The Family Guy* with me, as I have every episode now on DVD. In my defense I constantly remind my daughter that what we see on TV isn't real, and that seeing something on TV doesn't make it okay. I won't be buying *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4*, and I will pay closer attention to video game ratings in the future. For parents concerned about their children's viewing habits, here are some suggestions. Most cable and dish services now come with easy to use parental controls. Parents can easily set a code that must be entered anytime a program with a certain rating comes on. Additionally, if you are concerned about the amount of time your child is spending in front of the TV, try TV Allowance. TV Allowance is a product that meters the amount of TV viewing each member is allowed. Each member of the household is given a PIN code which must be entered to access the television set. Time allotments can then be set for each corresponding PIN number. So if Mom only want little Billy to watch 8 hours of TV per week, then she allots little Billy's PIN number 8 hours of

TV time per week. When his 8 hours are up, the TV shuts off and won't come back on for little Billy until the next week begins (TV Allowance). The last and best line of defense is still a little common sense. Know what your kids are interested in, and know

what they are doing with their time. If we all followed that simple rule, we wouldn't need to have this discussion.

References

Barbie is the property of the Mattel Corporation.

Bratz are the property of MGA entertainment

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The Family Guy, *Futurama*, and *The Powerpuff Girls* and all characters are property of

The Cartoon Network. .

Tony Hawk Pro Skater and *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 4* are the property of Activision.

