YOUNG PEOPLE, MEDIA AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

David Buckingham and Sara Bragg

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Contents

Preface and acknowledgements

This report is based on a research project entitled 'Young People, Media and Personal Relationships', which was conducted by the authors between June 2001 and July 2003. The project was funded by the Advertising Standards Authority, the British Board of Film Classification, the BBC, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission.

The project entailed three main activities. Firstly, we undertook a comprehensive review of previous research in the field. This review was published as a working paper entitled *Young People and Sexual Content on Television: A Review of the Research* by the Broadcasting Standards Commission in October 2002. It is also available on the BSC website at www.bsc.org.uk. Secondly, we undertook an extensive qualitative study, involving interviews and other fieldwork activities with children and parents. This aspect of the research will be published in November 2003 by Palgrave Macmillan in the form of a book, *Children, Sex and the Media: The Facts of Life?* A much abridged account of this research is provided in the first part of this report: readers who want a more extended and more 'academic' discussion of the data are referred to the book. The third aspect of the research was a questionnaire survey, which was undertaken in the Summer of 2002. The findings of this survey are presented in the second part of this report.

We are very grateful to Alan Chant at the ASA, Isobel Reid, Jane Sancho and Sarah Thane at the ITC, Andrea Wills at the BBC and Sue Clark at the BBFC for their support, and particularly to Andrea Millwood-Hargrave at the BSC for her co-ordinating role. We would also like to thank Lorraine Miller and Tam Huggett at the BSC for their administrative back-up.

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Finally, we thank all the young people who contributed to the project – those who completed our survey and, in particular, those who agreed to take part in the interviews, on whom we made sometimes onerous, sometimes intrusive, demands. All of them taught us something and we are most grateful for their co-operation and insights.

Summary of key findings

This report is based on a research project entitled 'Young People, Media and Personal Relationships', which was conducted by the authors between June 2001 and July 2003. The project was funded by the Advertising Standards Authority, the British Board of Film Classification, the BBC, the Broadcasting Standards Commission and the Independent Television Commission.

The project entailed a comprehensive review of the research literature (published separately by the BSC); an extensive qualitative study, involving interviews and other fieldwork activities with children and parents; and a questionnaire survey. In addition to this report, we are also publishing a book based on the research which gives a more detailed analysis of the qualitative study: *Young People, Sex and the Media* by David Buckingham and Sara Bragg (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Qualitative findings

1. **Whether or not they choose to do so, children frequently encounter sexual material in the media.**
   The children in our sample were encountering such material not just in 'adult' television programming, but also in children's programmes, movies, advertising, pop music, magazines and newspapers, and on the internet. However, relatively little of this material contained 'explicit' representations of sexual activity.

2. **The material children do encounter is quite diverse in terms of the 'messages' it is seen to contain.**
   The children sometimes found it difficult to identify the 'messages' about sex and relationships that were contained in this material; the messages they did identify were by no means uniform or always straightforward. The modern media offer **mixed** messages and often explicitly require consumers to make up their own minds about sexual issues.

3. **Children value the media as a source of information relative to other sources, such as parents or the school.**
   The children were generally very critical of the sex education they received in school, and many also found it embarrassing to be taught about such matters by their parents. They preferred media such as teenage magazines and soap operas on the grounds that they were often more informative, less embarrassing to use and more attuned to their needs and concerns.

4. **Nevertheless, children do not necessarily trust what they find in the media: they are 'literate', and often highly critical, consumers.**
   Children are not the naive or incompetent consumers they are frequently assumed to be. They use a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content; this develops both with age and with their experience of media.

5. **Children (and parents) are aware of media regulation, but reserve the right to make their own judgements.**
   All the children and parents in our research were aware of regulatory systems such as the Watershed and film classification, and used these as one source of information when choosing what to watch. However, children often resisted or rejected parents' attempts to decide on their behalf, and most parents were inclined to avoid an authoritarian approach, preferring to negotiate with their children over what they should see.

6. **Children do learn about sex and relationships from the media, but this is not a straightforward or reliable process.**
   The children often rejected overt attempts on the part of the media to teach them about sexual matters, and they were sceptical about some of the advice they were offered (e.g. in problem pages or talk shows). They were particularly resistant to the use of drama to convey pre-defined moral messages.

7. **Younger children do not necessarily always understand sexual references or connotations.**
   Younger children's partial knowledge means that they often ignore or misinterpret references to sexual matters, particularly where these are in the form of comic innuendo or 'suggestion' (as in the case of music videos). Younger children are also less aware of the cultural conventions through which sex is **signified** in the media.

8. **Morality is a key concern in children's interpretations of, and debates about, the media.**
   The children made judgements about sex, not in the abstract but in the context of 'love and relationships'. They debated at length the motivations that led characters to engage in sex and the consequences of their behaviour for others, and they placed a strong emphasis on the need for trust, fidelity and mutual respect.

9. **There were some striking differences between boys and girls – at least in how gender was 'performed' in relation to the media.**
   Girls were more ready to express sexual desire in relation to media images than boys, for whom such responses may have seemed 'politically incorrect'. Boys' responses to media images of men were often characterised by a form of insecurity or 'homosexual panic', which was sometimes reinforced by directly homophobic strategies on the part of parents.

10. **The influence of the media depends heavily upon the contexts of use, particularly in the family.**
    Children use media consumption as an opportunity to rehearse or police gendered identities; different styles of parenting also result in very different responses to sexual material, and very different ways of coming to terms with it. The media do not have an autonomous ability either to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them.

Survey findings

1. **The media as a source of sexual learning**
   Young people are often enthusiastic about the media as a source of sexual learning. Over two-thirds agree that they are useful or very useful as a '*way to find out about love, sex and relationships*' and that magazines in particular give useful information on these issues. Fifty four per cent agreed that the media '*try to help young people make up their own minds about sex*' and 58% that the media '*try to help young people understand the difference between right and wrong*', with only around a quarter disagreeing. There was less support among young people for the hypothesis that the media encourage young people to have sex too young: only 25% agreed.

   The media are now on a par with mothers as a 'useful' source of information. Sixty six per cent stated that mothers are useful or very useful for finding out about sex. In this survey only sex education lessons at school scored more highly: 80% stated that they were useful or very useful. However, as other surveys have consistently suggested, young people continue to have difficulty talking to fathers about issues related to love, sex and relationships: 34% found their fathers useful, the same rating given to 'posters and advertisements'.

   Young people feel that their parents underestimate their maturity and their existing or potential need for sexual information. Sixty nine per cent of 12 and 14-year-olds agreed that they know more about sex than their parents think they do. Ninety per cent also disagreed that they were too young to learn about sex.

2. **Access to sexual content**
   Despite some trends towards individualised viewing as they grow older, the majority of young people still consume media material in the company of others. While it would appear from children's perceptions that parents are not unduly concerned about regulating their children's viewing or limiting their viewing of sexual material on television, 50% of young people stated that parents had talked to them about these issues in relation to something they were watching together on television. Just over half of them (52%) welcomed such discussions. However, in general, 73% of 12 and 14-year-olds state that they do not like to see programmes or videos containing sex when they are with their mothers; 65% feel the same about viewing with their fathers.

   There is ample evidence not only that children can get access to sexual material, but also that they actively seek it out. Many children claim to be able to subvert parental viewing rules. A significant minority of 10-year-olds, and a majority of 12 to 14-year-olds, appear positively to enjoy adult-oriented programmes (although these may or may not contain sexual content).

3. **Judgements about sexual content in the media**
   Young people are also able to make judgements about what they do and do not want to watch on television. Of the two-thirds of respondents who had seen a programme or video that had 'too much' about sex in it, 64% had carried on watching, while the remainder (36%) had chosen to stop.

   As they grow older, young people appear to become less inclined to reject or be shocked by particular forms of sexual representation in the media. They are also more likely to hold that there should be more information about lesbian and gay relationships in the media.

   Gender and age are the most significant predictors of attitudes and behaviours in relation to the media. Despite popular myths, social class does not appear from our survey to be a relevant factor either in respect of young people's opinions on these issues or in relation to the degree of parental regulation, although it does impact on children's access to the internet.

Introduction

Children today are growing up much too soon – or so we are frequently told. They are being deprived of their childhood. Their essential innocence has been lost. Indeed, some would say that childhood itself is effectively being destroyed. For many people, perhaps the most troubling aspect of this phenomenon is to do with sex. Young people seem to be maturing physically – and showing an interest in sex – at an ever earlier age. Even quite young children appear to adults to be alarmingly knowledgeable about the intimate details of sexual behaviour. Children, it is argued, are being prematurely 'sexualised'.

There is a certain amount of evidence for these claims, at least as regards the sexual behaviour of teenagers. The age at which young people first experience sexual intercourse has steadily fallen over the past few decades, while the number of young people – particularly girls – who are sexually active has risen significantly (Moore and Rosenthal 1993). Britain has the highest rate of teenage and unplanned pregnancies in Europe, which despite a fall in the early 1990s have now begun to increase again. So, too, have sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV, and particularly among the heterosexual population. In fact, many of these developments began in the 1950s rather than, as is often thought, in the 'permissive' 1960s, although they are now widely seen as an indication of social and moral decline (Measor *et al*. 2000).

Much of the blame for this supposed loosening of sexual boundaries and the subsequent 'loss' of children's innocence has been placed on the media and on consumer culture more broadly. The media are often seen to promote an unhealthy 'obsession' with sex that amounts to a form of moral corruption. These arguments are traditionally the territory of right-wing moralists, although they are also increasingly voiced by more liberal commentators. Few seem willing to argue that the increasing prominence of sexual material in the media is in any way a positive thing. Some point to the levels of ignorance about sexual matters among the young and to the inadequacy of formal sex education; yet few seem prepared to justify the availability of sexual information in the media on the grounds that it represents a greater degree of openness.

In some respects, of course, this is an old issue. The concerns provoked by the sexual gyrations of pop stars in the 1950s – as in Elvis Presley's celebrated appearance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* – or by the steamy intimacies of television dramas in the 1970s such as *Bouquet of Barbed Wire*, may now appear merely quaint. Yet the arguments that were made then about their corrupting influence on children, and about their contribution to a more general moral decline, are very similar to those that continue to be made today.

However, this debate about the dangers of sexual content in the media seems to have taken on a new urgency in recent years. The advent of new media technologies – video, cable, satellite and, of course, the internet – has made it increasingly difficult to prevent young people from gaining access to sexually explicit material. Meanwhile, the regulation of the media has also become politically problematic. According to many social theorists, we now live in more pluralistic, secular societies, in which there is no longer a clearly defined consensus on moral issues. The media themselves have also increasingly sought to address

more diverse, fragmented 'taste communities' and there is a growing political commitment to the principle of 'free speech' (Thompson and Sharma 1998).

Cause for concern?

Whether we see these changes as evidence of a greater openness or as symptomatic of the rise of moral depravity, there appears to be some consensus about the idea that there is more sex in the media and that it is more 'explicit' than it used to be. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of television. In the United Kingdom both of the most recent newcomers to terrestrial television have attracted criticism on these grounds. In its early days, Channel 4 became notorious among more conservative critics for its explicit representations of sexual activity; more recently, Five (formerly Channel 5) has been criticised for screening 'adult' material in late night slots. It is often argued that sexual references and representations have become more frequent in mainstream programming – both before and after the 9.00 p.m. Watershed for family viewing.

But to what extent is this impression justified? Studies conducted in the United States suggest that there is indeed an increasing amount of sexual material on television there – although these studies rarely include systematic comparisons over more than a few years. Even so, talk about sex is more common than actual portrayals, and visual representations remain relatively rare (Kunkel 1999; 2001).

United States television is often considered to be less sexually explicit than British television, so it may be surprising to find that research in the United Kingdom has not reached similar conclusions. A report produced for the Broadcasting Standards Commission in 1999 found that fewer than one in five terrestrial programmes showed sexual behaviour and just over one-third contained verbal references, the large majority of which were fairly mild. Furthermore, there was no consistent increase in such material, at least over the 1990s. The report concluded that there was 'no actual evidence to support public perception of increased sexual activity' on British television (BSC 1999). These findings are broadly supported by a more recent 'update' (BSC 2002). This study found that the Watershed was broadly being maintained and that there had been little or no increase in sexual content in programmes transmitted before 9.00 p.m. There had been some increase in sexually explicit scenes in post-Watershed programmes, but most of this was accounted for by factual programmes which take sex as their theme (most of which were broadcast on Channel 4 and on Five). In mainstream programmes, most sex scenes are 'mild' (in the sense that they go no further than kissing) and most occur within established relationships. The contrast between these findings and those of the United States studies is quite striking; while they may reflect differences between British and American television, they also reflect different definitions of what 'counts' as sexual content (for more detailed discussion, see Bragg and Buckingham 2002).

Yet even if people **believe** there is more sex on television than there used to be, are they really bothered about this? To what extent do the anxieties expressed by newspaper columnists and politicians reflect more widespread public concern? In fact, research on public attitudes suggests that most people in Britain are fairly relaxed about this issue. When asked directly, a significant proportion of people agree that there is 'too much' sex on

television – although higher percentages agree that there is too much in the print media. However, attitudes towards sexual content do appear to have become more permissive in recent years: fewer respondents claim to find sex scenes 'offensive' or embarrassing, and a significant majority feel that they are acceptable if included as part of a storyline. As many as 93% of respondents in one BSC survey expressed a preference for self-regulation, claiming that viewers could turn off or over if they were offended by what they saw (BSC 1999).

These findings are paralleled by a broader shift towards more 'liberal' or 'permissive' attitudes towards sex in real life, particularly in respect of gay and lesbian relationships. Over the past 50 years, patterns of sexual behaviour have become more diverse and attitudes have become less prohibitive (Moore and Rosenthal 1993). Research by the regulatory bodies (e.g. Hanley 2000; Millwood Hargrave 1992; 1999) and broader social attitude surveys (e.g. Hill and Thomson 2000) have found that the British public is less and less likely to support a restrictive approach to public discussion of sexual issues.

There are some important social differences here. In general, men and young people are less likely to say that sex is an issue of concern, while women and older people are more likely to say they are 'offended' by sex on screen, or that there is 'too much' of it. However, many respondents in the BSC surveys also agreed that by the age of 15 young people were able to make up their own minds about what they should watch, a point on which adolescents and many parents also agree (Buckingham 1996; Millwood Hargrave et al. 1996). In terms of age differences, this research also suggests that there is likely to be a 'cohort effect' – i.e. that attitudes are likely to become more permissive in the future, especially as regards representations of gays and lesbians, an issue on which younger people are significantly more liberal.

Opinion polls of this kind have their limitations; however, the overall picture they paint is fairly clear. People certainly believe that there is more sex in the media than there used to be and yet public attitudes towards sex, both in the media and in real life, have also become more permissive over the years. So what is the basis of the concern about these issues – and to what extent is it justified?

Previous research

To some extent, the debate about sexual content in the media reflects an ongoing concern about propriety or decency – about what should or should not be shown or discussed in public. However, it also reflects assumptions about the **effects** of the media, particularly as regards children. When it comes to sex in the media, children are learning about many things which (we assume) they have not experienced in real life – things about which they may be intensely curious. And for this reason, they are often deemed to be particularly at risk of negative influences.

What does research tell us about these questions? In comparison with the enormous amount of research about the effects of media violence, there has been relatively little previous work in this field. Nearly all of it has been conducted in the United States and much of it has focused on what are seen to be 'negative' effects, such as promiscuity, premature sexual

activity and unsafe sexual practices. Most of the research seems to be based on the notion of 'role modelling' – i.e. the idea that young people identify with 'glamourous' media characters or personalities and are, therefore, led to copy their behaviour or to develop what researchers deem to be 'unrealistic' expectations or attitudes about sexual behaviour in real life.

We have reviewed this research in detail elsewhere (see Bragg and Buckingham 2002). In general, it is fair to say that it has been somewhat equivocal and inconclusive in its findings. There seems to be little agreement about influences on **behaviour** e.g. about whether television viewing influences the age at which young people first have intercourse or their propensity to engage in extra-marital sex (Wartella *et al*. 2000). Much of the research on **attitudinal** influences is correlational: for example, there are studies that purport to show a correlation between heavy television viewing and approval of non-marital sex or 'ambivalence towards marriage' – which seem to be implicitly regarded as negative attitudes (Bryant and Rockwell 1994; Signorielli 1991). The possibility that the media might have positive effects in this respect remains largely unexplored.

In all, this work exemplifies several of the familiar problems of media effects research. It focuses almost entirely on negative effects; it implicitly assumes that correlation is evidence of causality; it relies on simplistic assumptions about the relationships between media use, attitudes and behaviour; it fails to explain why effects arise in some cases and not others; it isolates media use from other social variables or accounts for those variables in unduly simplistic ways; it does not adequately consider how people relate media to other sources of information; and it tends to oversimplify complex questions to do with the meanings and pleasures people derive from the media.

Furthermore, much of the research is based on quite problematic moral and cultural assumptions. For example, it often seems to equate different kinds of extra-marital sexual activity – adultery and pre-marital sex are effectively treated as equivalent; and it implicitly presumes that these things are undesirable, as are (what it defines as) 'premature' or 'promiscuous' – or even 'unnatural' – sexual behaviour. In these respects, the research seems to reflect the progressively more puritanical moral climate in the United States (see Levine 2002).

Starting points

Our research starts from a rather different point from that of the American effects researchers. We can summarise these differences briefly as follows. First, we begin with different assumptions about **media**. We argue that media are more diverse and contradictory than simply a collection of 'negative' messages and that we need to look more broadly at the changing ways in which 'sex' is culturally defined, not least in the context of an increasingly consumer-oriented society. We also begin with different assumptions about **learning**. We assume that the formation of sexual identity is a complex process – that it is unstable, insecure, always 'under construction'; we argue that this cannot be explained by mechanistic notions of 'role modelling'. We also see this process in **social** rather than merely psychological terms: we are concerned with how young people use and interpret media in the context of their interpersonal relationships and how this relates to the formation of their

social identities. We also begin, finally, with different assumptions about **children** and childhood. We start from the view that young people are active users of media and we attempt to pay close attention to the ways in which they understand and make judgements about what they see.

Starting from this perspective enables us to move beyond the reductive either/or questions that typically plague media research. The question of whether sex in the media is good or bad for children is one that, in our view, has no absolute or meaningful answer. This is not to suggest that the media do not have 'effects' on children. On the contrary, it is to suggest that their effects are significantly more complex – and perhaps even more pervasive – than most effects researchers have begun to imagine. If we aim to develop a sensible basis for social policy in this field, we need to be asking some more sophisticated questions.

Methodology

During 2001 and 2002, we conducted over 100 interviews with a total of 120 young people aged from 9 to 17. We also interviewed approximately 70 parents and conducted a survey of almost 800 children. In a pilot stage of the study, we talked to 24 students in various locations in the south east. In the main body of the research, we interviewed 96 young people, 12 boys and 12 girls from each of school years 5, 7, 9 and 12 (i.e. age groups 9-10, 11-12, 13-14 and 16-17). We gathered our sample from state schools in different locations. One was a commuter belt suburb outside Manchester, surrounded by countryside, in a highly successful and over-subscribed specialised 11-18 secondary school and its primary 'feeder' school nearby. The ethnic intake of the school was predominantly white; only one student out of the 48 who took part in the research was minority ethnic. The other schools were in Essex: their intake, from the surrounding housing estates, was predominantly working class, and six students of the 48 who took part were minority ethnic. Although the secondary school had recently received positive inspection reports and its examination results were improving, its reputation as the 'worst in the borough' seemed to persist and was well known to its students.

In each school, one staff member liaised with year tutors and class teachers who helped to recruit students. This was done mainly through distributing flyers with information about the project and asking for volunteers. Although our offer of cash rewards for participation (between £15 and £25, according to age) was undoubtedly an inducement, in some cases teachers had to encourage particular individuals to make up the numbers. Each student had to obtain parental consent.

Sara then met as many of the students as possible, talking to them in their age groups (12 students at a time) about the project and what was required from them. This fell into several stages:

- Their first task was to keep what we called a 'diary' or 'scrapbook' about images of love, sex and relationships in the media. We supplied a blank, unlined A4 notebook for this purpose. The children were asked to include a page or so about themselves, their families, their access to media and their tastes and preferences, and then to write either in the form of a daily account of 'anything that they saw in the media' that related to the theme of love, sex and relationships, or in general about their views, in both cases including relevant images from magazines or newspapers. The older students (aged 16-17) were also asked to look back on the role the media had played for them in finding out about love, sex and relationships when they were younger. They had two or three weeks in which to complete this task.

- The children nominated a friend with whom they were happy to be interviewed and so talked first in pairs to either Sara or David. In the event, only one of these interviews was with a mixed pair. In these interviews, we asked them to say more about the content of their notebooks and talked generally, e.g. about 'good storylines' about love, sex and relationships in the media (particularly soap operas), often asking them whether they thought such material contained 'messages' about the theme. We also discussed their family rules about viewing sexual material.

- At the end of these first interviews the children were each given a videotape of about two hours' duration to view at home, containing whole programmes and extracts from television that raised salient issues. It included two clips from talk shows, four music videos and episodes of *The Simpsons* and *Friends*. The two youngest age groups were given an edited storyline about teenage sex from *Grange Hill*, the older ones an episode of *Dawson's Creek*. All of this material was pre-Watershed and age-appropriate. The 16-17 year-olds were also given an episode of a Channel 4 British youth drama *As If* and an extract from *So Graham Norton*. (A more detailed description of these clips is provided in Appendix 3.) The children were asked to write briefly about the video, e.g. about which extracts they liked or disliked.

- Interviews about the videos took place a fortnight later, in groups of four (hence there were two all-girl, two all-boy and two mixed groups in each age band). In these, we asked them to talk about the material they had seen, whether they had seen it before, what they thought about the programmes in general, who they thought they were for, their 'messages' and so on. Towards the end of these interviews we showed them a selection of advertisements that had been the subject of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (for Lee and Levi jeans, Opium perfume and French Connection UK Clothes). At this point we also asked students to comment specifically on issues relating to regulation or to 'talk back' to the regulatory bodies by passing on 'messages' through us.

- In the final stage of the research, all students in the 11-12 and 13-14 age bands were given sample reading material from tabloid newspapers and girls' magazines and were interviewed about this in the same groups two days after the previous interview. Our funders had encouraged this inclusion primarily in order to gain a balanced picture across a range of media, rather than focusing mainly on television.

All the interviews were in school time, in various locations – offices, seminar and counselling rooms, even a stock cupboard – and lasted about an hour. They were audio taped and this material was subsequently transcribed in full and analysed using a computer programme for qualitative data, NVIVO. All participants have chosen or been given pseudonyms. We refer to them here by their names, location (in which 'P' indicates the pilot stage in the south east, 'S' the Essex and 'N' the north of England setting) and age (which we have simplified to ages 10, 12, 14 and 17, although some children may have been a little younger).
In addition, unless it is obvious from the context in which it is used, we refer to the origin of each quotation, as 'D' for the scrapbook or diary, 'P' for the first (pair) interview, 'G' for the group interviews and 'W' for other writing, such as the notes children made about the videos.

We subsequently conducted interviews with 48 parents, in 10 groups of three to seven people. Four of these groups were recruited by writing to parents of young people who had been involved in the research; three were recruited from parents and classroom assistants working in our primary schools; and the remaining three were recruited through personal contacts. Three took place during the day in the primary schools, the remainder in the evening at the homes of one of the parents; we supplied snacks and drinks, and paid participants £15. Thirteen participants were parents of young people who had also been

involved in the research. We asked parents first of all to reflect on their own experience of using the media to learn about love, sex and relationships when they were young, then moved on to talk about what they did about this in their own families – what rules they laid down, what they said to their children about sex, what significant incidents had occurred, and so on. If time allowed, we also showed some short extracts from the videotape that the children had been given and invited comments. These groups are referred to by a number and location ('N' for those in the north and 'S' for those in the south, which included both Essex and other locations in the south east).

Finally, in order to complement the qualitative study, we also carried out a larger quantitative survey in the schools in which we had conducted the main part of the research. The survey was completed by all the students in the year groups from which our interviewees had been selected except the oldest i.e. by students aged 9-10, 11-12 and 13-14 (school years 5, 7 and 9). A total of 778 surveys were returned. The aim of the survey was to consolidate our discussions in interviews and ascertain if certain key findings and perceptions were more widely shared. The questions were based on issues that had emerged during the course of our interviews. They covered media access and use in the home (including privatised access in the bedroom); rules about television watching; preferred means for learning about sex, and demographic data (age, gender, family type and composition etc). The 12 and 14-year-olds were asked to respond to a list of 19 questions on a five point scale (agree strongly/agree/disagree/disagree strongly/don't know). The 10-year-olds were given a simpler task: they were offered only 10 statements about sexual media and asked to respond according to whether they liked, disliked, thought it was OK to see them or didn't know. The results were coded and analysed using SPSS.

All the names of parents and children involved in the study have been changed in order to protect confidentiality. In order to avoid confusion, we refer to the children and parents involved in the qualitative study as 'participants', while the children in the survey are referred to as 'respondents'.

Qualitative and quantitative methods: strengths and limitations

Although we discuss the two main aspects of this project in separate sections of this report, they are clearly complementary. Quantitative research is obviously very good at giving the 'big picture': it allows us to identify broad tendencies across a large group of respondents and to investigate some of the most significant differences within that group. Applying tests of statistical significance enables us to offer explanations that are much more than speculative. However, quantitative research is generally much less effective in exploring the meanings that people attach to their behaviour or the detailed ways in which they use and interpret the media. These areas are much more effectively explored via qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews and focus groups – although the intensive nature of this research generally makes it impossible to accumulate a large sample.

In both cases, there are questions of reliability. What people assert in interviews, or in responses to questionnaires, may not be a reliable guide to their actions or to opinions they might express in other contexts, to different audiences. In both contexts, people may take up particular positions because they seem 'appropriate', or in order to be subversive, rather

than because they express a coherent world view.
Finally, there are questions of interpretation, both in the process of data gathering and in the subsequent analysis. People may interpret interview or survey questions in quite different ways from the intentions of researchers and, while we may endeavour to remove ambiguity, this is bound to be a difficult task. The data then undergoes a further process of distillation in attempting to extract meaning from it. This is the case even in reporting the results of a survey. For example, in attempting to identify broader patterns among our sample, we have tried to use relatively neutral terms. Yet even in describing some young people as more 'permissive' than others, we recognise that we are using a loaded term and that others might read our findings very differently.

Nevertheless, we believe that using multiple methods, as we have done here, does at least begin to address some of these limitations. Through the range of activities we undertook we hoped to access different voices. In the qualitative study, we staged the tasks to invite, first, a more personal, intimate voice (in their notebooks and pair interviews) and, subsequently, a more public one (in the group interviews). Much depended on how participants interpreted these tasks, but our diverse methods – writing and speaking, in pairs and in groups, about our choice of media and about theirs, and so on – did produce a range of ways of speaking about media representations of love, sex and relationships. Coming back to particular issues in different contexts enabled us to explore them in greater depth and to take account of the complexities (and sometimes inconsistencies) in children's attitudes.

Perhaps predictably, boys seemed more reluctant to engage with the diary format than girls. Sebastian (N, 14), for example, focused on describing media he had seen, explaining in interview that this was a deliberate strategy because he was not able to write about his '*feelings*'. Others adopted a 'dear diary' mode, signing off each day with their name and lipstick kisses (Leigh P, 13) had declared boldly on the cover '*Keep Out!*', underlining its private nature. Girls especially handed in notebooks with covers vibrantly adorned with their names and those of favourite bands and stars in coloured, gold or silver pen, and pictures carefully cut out and glued down on every page. However, many clearly oriented their tasks to a 'public sphere', as when Lysa (S, 10, D), with more than a touch of defiance against an imaginary interlocutor, declared of a problem page she had taken from a teenage magazine, '*I want you to know that the page below does not make me feel uncomfortable in any way, it's excellent*.' Others interpreted the task more as a form of school project: Lori (S, 14), for example, presented a carefully illustrated scrapbook, including extracts, pictures and drawings, and summarised at the end her 'before and after' views on love, sex and relationships.

The interviews also trod a delicate balance between being shaped by the school context and by the topic. On the one hand, the project ran the risk of becoming like school work, particularly when we asked the children to give opinions on the 'messages' contained in the videos and articles we showed them. Yet on the other, it offered a welcome break from lessons which we tried to make as relaxed and informal as possible – not least by supplying large quantities of biscuits and chocolates. For various reasons, what people say in interviews (or, indeed, in response to questionnaires) may not correspond to how they engage with the media in everyday life: they may wish to present themselves as more

'critical' or 'serious', as this is a socially desirable response. In this context, as we shall see, children were often keen to be seen as knowledgeable and sophisticated about sexual matters – even if this stance was not one they were able consistently to maintain.

Despite these difficulties, we feel that the methods we used have several advantages over alternative approaches. Without being naive or sentimental, we believe that our methods give us access to children's voices and perspectives in ways that other methods do not and that they provide insights into how children use and interpret the media that are frequently ignored or over-simplified in other research. We would strongly contest the idea that qualitative research is automatically more 'subjective' than quantitative research, or more subject to interpretation. The methods we have used enable us to be systematic and rigorous, both in ensuring the representativeness of the data we present and analyse, and in comparing material gathered through different methods and in different contexts.

PART ONE
The qualitative study

1. Learning about sex and relationships

> *'My mum doesn't say anything about* [sex on television] *because she knows I know everything about sex and relationships.'*
> Courtney (N, 12, P):

Courtney's claim to '*know everything*' about sex and relationships was one that was repeatedly echoed by children throughout our research. Although a few of the youngest children asserted that there were things they did not **want** to know, or that they did not feel ready for, most children claimed to have enjoyed a state of absolute knowledge from about the age of 11. While some, like Courtney, believed that their parents were content for them to '*know everything*', others felt that parents might be disturbed to discover the full extent of their knowledge. In our survey, no fewer than 78% of children responded positively to the statement, '*I know more about sex than my parents think I do*.'

Nevertheless, learning 'the facts of life' is a rather more complex and uneven process than these easy assurances might seem to imply. Before we look specifically at the media, therefore, it is important to consider some of the other ways in which children learn about love, sex and relationships.

Learning from experience

We did not set out in this research to gather systematic information about children's sexual experiences or to assess their levels of sexual knowledge. However, we did learn a good deal about how they perceived the 'sexual worlds' in which they lived. In many cases, these worlds appeared quite ambivalent and contradictory. They combined realism and fantasy, the romantic and the sordid, sentiment and sexuality, in sometimes uneasy combinations.

For many of the children in our sample, romantic relationships – if that is, indeed, the correct description – appeared to have begun at quite a young age. Several of the 10-year-olds claimed to be 'going out with' children of the opposite sex; some, like Rory and Skye (N, 10), who specifically asked to be interviewed together, claimed to have been doing so since the age of five. In many cases, 'going out together' did not appear to involve very much actual 'going out' and, in some instances, children who were 'going out together' did not even seem to spend much time in each other's company. Nevertheless, the pressure of playground gossip was quite intense. Children described how they would be 'called' (i.e. teased) for 'fancying' people – particularly if those people were deemed to be 'ugly' or, alternatively (in the case of girls), condemned for being 'frigid' if they had not kissed anyone yet.

Older children looked back on this period with ironic nostalgia. Phoebe (N, 14, G), for example, recalled how she had 'got married' in primary school, with the collusion of their teacher, who had involved the whole class in making paper flowers and confetti.
It subsequently emerged that this was her second marriage, the first having taken place at the age of five. Yet even without the benefit of hindsight, the younger children were clearly aware of the difference between these playground relationships and 'serious' ones.

In general, it seemed to be agreed that such relationships were just '*something you giggle about with your friends*,' as Izzie (S, 12, P) put it.

However, when it came to the 14-year-olds, the overtly sexual dimensions of these relationships were much more apparent. By this stage, it seemed that school itself had become quite a sexually charged place (cf. Wolpe 1988). There were plentiful stories in our diaries and interviews of children gossiping and bragging, not just about who was 'going out' with whom, but also about their sexual exploits. These kinds of rumours obviously contributed to the building of individuals' reputations, but they were also a means whereby sexual knowledge and assumptions about sexuality were circulated and reinforced.

Like the school, the family is a major source of such 'observational' learning: children learn from observing parents' behaviour, irrespective of what parents might overtly attempt to teach them. Yet in many instances, the children's experience of family life was one of break-up and separation. Several did not see their fathers at all, or only did so rarely; others saw them on a couple of days each week. Others reported that they could regularly hear their parents arguing. As such, there was little evidence of parents providing positive 'role models' of romantic relationships. Furthermore, while older siblings, and even aunts and uncles, can be seen as sexual beings – and several of the children made quite satirical observations of this – there is a widespread resistance to seeing parents in this way. Several children expressed revulsion at their parents kissing, let alone the idea of them actually having sex.

Yet, if the family did not generally appear to encourage much optimism about romantic relationships, other experiences positively undermined this. For example, even the 12-year-olds in our sample were well aware of the operation of the sex industry in their area. For the working-class girls (although not exclusively for them), sexual danger was particularly close to home. Several spoke of the threat of '*shady men*' and '*paedophiles*' in their area and many said that their mothers would not allow them to go out on their own, or to the local park, for this reason. Yet the stories they recounted did not only refer to the threat of abduction by strangers: several girls quoted examples of press reports about 'normal' husbands and fathers (or, indeed, teachers) suddenly turning into rapists and serial killers.

Taken together, these experiences form a complex picture. On the one hand, sex was associated with prostitutes and paedophiles and with the experience of parents arguing and breaking up. Yet on the other, it meant 'going out' and even 'getting married' in a way that might be described as merely playful. Even the 14-year-olds seemed to be able to sustain romantic aspirations despite the crudity of school gossip and the sexual dangers that they saw surrounding them.

Sex lessons

Nearly all the children were quite resistant to attempts to teach them about sex and relationships. All the older children in our sample had experienced some kind of formal sex education in school, although their responses to this were almost uniformly negative. Sex education, it appeared, was widely seen as an opportunity to '*muck about*'. Perhaps predictably, the most familiar complaint here was that sex education taught you what you already knew. Furthermore, several children maintained that sex education was mainly

aimed at girls, which effectively permitted the boys to '*take the mickey*' and embarrass them (cf. Lees 1994; Measor et al. 2000; Wolpe 1988). It was also argued that the focus of school sex education was much too narrowly '*medical*' or '*scientific*'.

Yet, if school was not very positively rated as a source of sex education, neither were parents. Family discussions of sexual matters – at least in relation to the media – were frequently characterised by a great deal of mutual embarrassment: as Chantel (N, 14, P) put it: '*It's really embarrassing when they give you talks*.' Several children claimed that their parents were too '*protective*', and that this made it difficult for them to discuss such issues together. As Melanie (N, 10, P) put it: '*They want to keep me a child for ever';* or as Eve (N, 17, P) argued, *'They think you are six until you are 26, don't they*?' Some children even felt they had to pretend not to know about certain things in order to conform to their parents' image of them as '*innocent*'. Like teachers, parents were sometimes accused of trying to teach children things they already knew. In general, fathers were seen as particularly difficult to talk to. While girls were inclined to approach their mothers, boys appeared to do the same if, indeed, they looked to their parents at all. By contrast, children with older siblings – particularly same-sex siblings – frequently claimed that they were better off in terms of learning about sex and relationships.

Many children clearly saw the media as a key source of information and ideas about love, sex and relationships, sometimes against the judgement of parents:

> *'You sort of, like, want to watch it to learn about it. But like you're scared . . . you're sort of like embarrassed in watching it in front of your mums because they say like, "Turn away," and if you say, "No", and they go, "Well, it's a bit rude and I think you should like go to bed." And I say, like, "But we've got to learn about it," but she doesn't know that I know about it yet . . . but I do and I want to learn about it, but she doesn't know that I want to learn about it.'*
> Rachel (N, 10, P):

Given that most of the interviews were conducted in 2002, it may be surprising that there was very little mention of the internet (e.g. in the form of chat rooms) in this respect. As we shall see, some of the older boys had located pornography via the web, but for most of the children it was more mainstream media such as soap operas and (for the girls, at least) teenage magazines that were seen to be the most significant sources of information. These media were seen to possess several advantages over other potential sources. They addressed topics directly that many children found embarrassing to discuss with their parents or teachers, or that parents might feel they were not 'ready' for. In some cases, this included information about physical development. For example, Bea (N, 10, P) described how she had been 'helped' by reading a feature 'all about boobs' in the girls' magazine *Shout*. For the older children, the media also offered information on sexual 'techniques' which was harder to obtain elsewhere: as Chloe (N, 17, P) pointed out, sex education in schools did not tell you, '***how*** *to have sex*' whereas magazines would tell you '*anything you wanna know*'. This informative but not unduly 'serious' approach was seen as a positive quality. As Phoebe (N, 14, P) argued, the magazines didn't, '*Tell you what to do . . . they just put it in and see what you think about it*.' The media also offered the benefit of anonymity, particularly if they were consumed privately. As Rachel (N, 12) put it, when you

are reading a magazine:

> *'It's as if someone's having a conversation with you, but they don't know who you are and you don't know who they are. So you're just finding it out, but no one knows about it.'*

Nevertheless, this was not an either/or choice. The children described various ways in which these different sources could be combined or might complement each other. Some parents positively used the media as a kind of 'teaching aid': television, in particular, was seen by both parents and children to offer valuable opportunities to discuss topics that might otherwise prove awkward to raise. Learning about sex was also often a collective process, conducted among the peer group. In general, girls appeared to find this process easier than boys: many boys agreed that they were less likely to discuss such things with their friends, for fear of more '*mickey-taking*'.

Needing (and not needing) to know

However, it would be false to suggest that the children were necessarily possessed of an insatiable curiosity about sexual matters. Indeed, several of the younger children argued quite strongly that they were not yet ready to learn about sex or that they did not need to know. Tania and Lucy (S, 10, P), for example, argued that they did not really need the advice about snogging they had found in Mizz, a teenage girls' magazine, because, '*We're not the age to do that yet*.' Likewise, Kim (N, 12, P) resisted her mother's attempts to teach her about sex on similar grounds: '*I'm going, "Oh, I don't need to know this right now.*"'

One of the most interesting expressions of this view came from Will (S, 10), who wrote in his diary in response to a 'sexy' advertisement for beer:

> *'I think I should know about it, but not right now, because I'm too young to understand.'*

When we asked whether he would expect to find out about all this from school or from his parents, Will replied:

> *'Neither. I think I've got to work it out myself . . . by doing research and then, eventually, when I get older I'll find out.'*

As these observations imply, children calibrate themselves in terms of what is seen as appropriate or necessary to know. Will's curiously academic notion of '*research*' also seems to encapsulate something of the gradual, even haphazard, nature of sexual learning. Despite the assurances of children who claimed to '*know everything*', it was clear that their knowledge was much less than absolute. '*Finding out*' was not a once-and-for-all event, but an ongoing process, a matter of '*piecing it together*' from a variety of sources. And finally, Will's insistence on '*working it out himself*' was also typical of the independent approach many of the children adopted, or sought to adopt.

As this implies, the media do not have 'effects' in isolation from the social contexts in which they are used and the social relationships that surround them. If the media are, indeed, a powerful source of information about sexual matters, it is clear that their power is not exercised in isolation.

2. Gender and sexuality

One of the most immediately striking (and perhaps predictable) differences across our sample was between the boys and the girls. Although we were wary of explaining these differences by recourse to biology, our interviewees did not seem to share our misgivings. They spoke volubly on the subject, offering familiar and often traditional images of men as less civilised, more subject to urges, more uncontrollable and less responsible than women (cf. Moore and Rosenthal 1993). Thus, we were frequently told that boys were '*sex mad*', '*just after one thing*', with '*sex on the brain*'. Moreover, we were assured that men like looking at naked bodies (but of women and never of men) and set more store by a woman's looks than her personality. They aren't interested in other people's problems; they can't admit that they have problems of their own, but in any case, '*Don't have such big problems as girls*' (Seamus, N, 14, P). They swear and fight, but do not cry. Perhaps it is fortunate that their main function is just to '*fertilise the egg*' anyway (Krystal, S, 14, P). Girls, by contrast, were repeatedly described in terms such as '*helpful*', '*open minded*', '*comfortable with naked women*', as more '*emotional*', '*sensible*', '*serious*', '*mature*', '*cuddly and kissy*' or '*lovey dovey*', more interested in personalities than looks. They '*stick together with their friends*' and '*help each other*', although Blake (S, 12, P) claimed they, '*Can't be understood*.'

Young people's attempts to explain such differences drew on popular ideas about genetics and evolution. From this perspective, gender differences were designed to '*fit perpetuation of the species*' (Jon, N, 17, P). Male activity and female passivity, we were told, were hardwired into the brain. Such deterministic accounts would seem pessimistic about the possibilities of change. Yet, unsurprisingly, the stories the children told of their everyday lives suggested a more confused or fractured picture. In the first place, they identified inconsistencies and often exempted themselves or their friends from the gendered polarities they otherwise claimed to be true. Thus, Trevor (N, 17, P) distanced himself from traditional masculinity, declaring, '*I don't consider myself a man*' – a view that was more comfortably adopted by the older boys than the younger ones. Meanwhile, Caitlin (N, 12, P) argued that, '*Some boys feel the same way as girls*' and pondered whether she was perhaps herself *'a boy really*' because she wrestled with her brother and played his computer games.

Secondly, much of what they said supported the idea that gender is a matter of 'performance' – of **doing** rather than **being** (Butler 1990). This performance was one that required constant monitoring, both of oneself and of others. Interviewees explained how girls who were into football or computer games were '*weirdos*' or '*tomboys*' (a term generally used pejoratively, although older girls were able to reclaim it). Those who had vowed to remain 'virgins' (which, in their terms, meant choosing not to kiss boys) were picked on in the playground. Non-normative forms of sexuality were termed 'sick' or 'perverted'; and many boys felt the threat of violence and shame if they engaged in any behaviour or expressed feelings that might be thought 'gay'.

The media's role

In line with these arguments, our participants were keen to define themselves through the attitudes they expressed towards particular stars, genres and programmes. Thus, like many others, Ethan and Seth (N, 12, P) argued that '*watching stuff about love and sex is more of a woman thing*' and that '*women like romance, men like action and shooting*'. While this was partly about proclaiming one's tastes, it was also about engaging with, or interpreting, media in gender-specific ways. Assertions that boys would watch particular pop videos with their '*tongues hanging out*' or would '*laugh*' at girls' magazines where girls would be '*serious*', did not just reflect what actually happened: they also acted as statements about what **should** be the case.

However, the media offer children a variety of ways of learning to 'do' boy or girl. Some media gave participants a 'place to speak from' about gender, with confidence and pleasure. For example, the lengthy diary-cum-scrapbook – '*my personal and complete views on the situation*' – produced by Krystal (S, 14) displayed a range of contradictory feelings and views in the format of a teenage magazine. This was not the voice of passive 'romance' as identified in earlier girls' magazines (McRobbie 1991), but an active, self-conscious, reflective one, playing delightedly both with identity and with the literacies acquired from immersion in teenage girls' culture ('*Most things we talk about have to do with the coolest boy on TV, the hottest guy in the magazine, coolest song on the radio and the hot, hot, hot film and pop starz*.') Far from passively acquiescing in pre-packaged gender identities, Krystal's familiarity with the media gave her a place to speak from and to develop the confident, collective speaking voice of 'girl power' – and, at least in her case, this was something that went beyond sexual assertiveness to encompass a more general self-confidence and sense of control over her own destiny.

However, the media do not serve all equally in this respect. Lee (N, 12) was – on her teachers' accounts – extremely keen to be involved in the project, but she found it hard to be forthcoming in her diary or in interviews. At one point, taking up our invitation to write about 'what you like', she wrote:

> *'Now, I'm not writing about media, I am writing about just today, Pancake Day. I am writing about what I like and well I just love pancakes.'*

Her interest in participating in the research may have indicated that love, sex and relationships were pertinent issues for her. However, as a girl who was passionate about football, uninterested in 'girlie' culture and described herself as '*not a romantic type*', the media did not seem to give her a position from which to speak as they did for Krystal.

As this implies, young people fashion different styles of femininity and masculinity through their investments in media, and through their presentation of these to others. Thus, there were marked disparities in responses to 'chick flicks' such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Shallow Hal* and women-oriented programmes such as *Ally McBeal*. Many younger boys had seen some of these films on video, although they offered very different accounts of them from the girls. For example, Leo and Clint (S, 10, P) confined their recollection of

Bridget Jones's Diary to a scene in which she had worn a 'transparent top', while Trevor (N, 17, P) offered a critique of its negative '*role models*' for women.

Awareness of male contempt for such texts may have only reinforced their usefulness for some girls in maintaining their gender identity. Their accounts suggested that they found them useful in addressing fears and offering imaginary solutions, in ways that both confirmed existing beliefs about gender relations and consoled them. For instance, *Shallow Hal*, where a man is put under a spell that means he sees only 'inner beauty' and not his girlfriend's actual obesity, appeared both to confirm Krystal and Holly's (S, 14, P) pessimistic view that men are '*as shallow as a puddle*' and to hold out a comforting 'message' about 'personality not looks':

> *'It actually shows a man realising that it's not just about their body, it's about what they're like underneath.'*

Girls also often talked about their identification with the central characters. Lisa and Kelly (N, 14, P), for example, claimed that *Bridget Jones's Diary* was a transparent reflection of '*how we actually act in life*'. However, the girls' discussions of these texts also suggested that they are not taken so seriously; that they feed fantasies, not actions in the real world (cf. Hermes 1995). In the process, however, they also help to clarify one's feelings, to connect one to others and to give meaning to problems that may have been experienced in isolation.

Of course, not all girls shared these positive responses to such films – Naomi (N, 14, P) condemned *Bridget Jones's Diary* as '*pathetic*' in much the same terms as boys. Meanwhile, some texts offered reading positions to both male and female audiences. *Sex and the City*, for example, was popular with both (older) boys and girls, and was readily construed by both as a means to learn about the opposite sex and about specific issues (two of the older boys specifically mentioned testicular cancer). It gave the girls, particularly, ways of thinking about themselves; discussions were often dominated by debates about which of them was like which character from the programme.

However, there are other texts that raise issues of love, sex and relationships that may be less immediately obvious – and may be particularly significant for boys. An interesting example here is WWF (now WWE) wrestling. Few boys discussed wrestling in relation to our theme, even though it was clearly popular with many. Nonetheless, it may have much to say about sexuality and gender relations, particularly given its increasing emphasis on relationships in the 'behind the scenes' sequences that are interspersed with the actual bouts. As Kurt (P, 13, G) commented, it:

> *'Kind of like turns into a soap opera more every day.'*

According to them, wrestling offered an antagonistic and instrumental view of personal relationships:

> *'You marry the wrong people and sometimes – sometimes it's just marry for money really.'*
> (Joseph, S, 12)

Television wrestling savages codes of decorum and middle-class ideas about sexuality, albeit within a framework of iconoclastic humour that renders moral schemas irrelevant. Like some other 'masculine' genres, it is deserving of closer study in this context.

Sexuality

All our interviewees demonstrated a familiarity and confidence with the categories of 'lesbian' and 'gay' – whether as people represented in the media or as potential audiences. This extended throughout the age range – for instance, Alma (S, 10, P) recounted how her six-year-old sister had chanted, '*Gypsy is lezzie, Gypsy is gay*' after seeing a lesbian storyline on *Home and Away*, and that she '*knew what a lesbian is*'. Rory (N, 10, P) discussed how, in *2000 Acres of Sky*, a character had responded to the revelation that his father was gay. All claimed to have 'got' jokes about lesbianism and gayness in the episodes of *Friends* we gave them.

We do not have evidence here about how self-identified lesbian or gay teenagers related to media depictions of love, sex and relationships. However, we can comment on the varied meaning of lesbian and gay sexualities. In general, the children seemed to regard sexuality as a matter of inborn essential identity. For instance, Eve (N, 17, P) argued:

> *'You can't encourage gay people to be straight. They never – even if they had a wife and three kids, they still wouldn't actually be straight would they?'*

On the other hand, as we shall discuss in the next section, younger children, boys in particular, exhibited 'homosexual panic' in discussion of media images. 'Gay' seemed to serve here as a catch-all term denoting something to be feared, that was used to police their own and others' behaviours and statements.

By contrast, asserting support for gay rights and gay identities was a distinctive feature of interviews with the older, middle-class students. In their diaries, several were critical of what they saw as a lack of gay representations in the media or discussed those they had seen (such as *Ellen* or *Queer as Folk*) in generally approving terms. They criticised the '*compulsory heterosexuality*' they detected in teenage magazines and supported gay stars' right to come out. None of these participants discussed gay identity in terms of whether it was 'right' or 'wrong' according to predetermined traditional moralities. On the contrary, being 'honest' about yourself and accepting of your gay identity was seen as necessary in order to achieve fulfilment and happiness.

Likewise, in their discussion of programmes such as *As If*, *Metrosexuality* and *Queer as Folk*, these young people were keen to convey their anti-homophobic position. These programmes conveyed an attractive metropolitan 'chic', which (for some at least) verged on the utopian: Lois (P, 17, G), for example, argued that *As If* showed life as she would like it to be rather than as it was, in that its sexual tolerance and liberation were not as close to her daily experience as she would wish. Watching these gay-themed shows helped these teenagers to feel part of a tolerant, inclusive community and provided opportunities to proclaim a liberal self-image. At the same time, this self-image seemed to be defined in opposition to younger (more 'immature') people and – implicitly – to the working class.

By contrast, such anti-homophobic views were less apparent among our older working-class interviewees. Although they were equally (and perhaps more) likely to state that they had gay work colleagues or gay relatives, fewer stated that they knew gay people as friends.

They were also less than politically correct in their language – referring to '*poofters*' or '*queers*', for example. The girls here were noticeably more liberal than the boys, some of whom were quite overtly homophobic. However, it may have been that programmes such as *As If* were too strongly identified with middle-class, London-based or metropolitan values – in effect, with a form of 'political correctness'. In this respect, expressions of homophobia might be seen to serve as a channel for a broader form of resentment (Pfeil 1995).

3. Bodies on display: pin-ups, porn and pop

The public display of images of naked human bodies has a very long history. Some of the earliest visual representations yet discovered feature images of the naked human form, clearly designed for the contemplative erotic gaze. Yet the display of bodies in painting and sculpture is generally mediated by its presentation as 'art'. By contrast, the display of the body in advertising images, newspapers or music videos is rarely defined as art – despite the protestations of some of their producers. Such material is often seen as mere 'titillation' – or, in more directly critical terms, as a form of 'exploitation' or 'objectification'. The children in our study were very aware of these images and of the issues they raised.

Pin-up girls (and boys)

While some might perceive 'pin-up' images of the Page 3 variety as a prehistoric relic of patriarchy, many of the children whom we interviewed saw them as merely a banal fact of life. Unsurprisingly, the working-class children were more familiar with this kind of material and some of the middle-class children suggested that these images lacked '*class*' – as Harvey (N, 17, P) put it:

> *'They're all glamour models, but there's nothing glamourous about it, is there?'*

Inevitably, the most enthusiastic advocates of Page 3 were the boys, particularly the younger ones such as Clint (S, 10, P), who had thoughtfully visited the Sun's website and downloaded several pages of such images for his diary. When asked what they might be learning from this material, Pierre and Dale (S, 14, P, G) confidently asserted:

> *'Most of the women want it . . . they're just gagging for it.'*

According to many of the girls, however, the typical Page 3 reader was a pathological case, a person who was so 'sad' (i.e. pathetic) that he would buy the newspaper solely for the pin-ups. Yet while mocking and condemning such behaviour, Jessica (S, 14, P) also suggested that there was an element of performance here:

> *'Sometimes they just do it because they like their mates looking at it.'*

However, very few children expressed much concern about the **ideological** dimensions of this material: there were very few complaints about 'sexism' or women being shown as 'sex objects', although we would be surprised if the children had not encountered these arguments in school (if not elsewhere). The key issue was rather one of **propriety** i.e. of precisely how much flesh was on display. Some of the girls said there was little difference in this respect between Page 3 and pornography, while others described the boys who read it as '*perverts*'. Some of the younger boys, however, argued that this kind of material was acceptable, both because it did not show '*too much*' and because it was not pornographic.

Nevertheless, several expressed concern about the potential influence of such material on 'little children'. Invariably, the 'little children' concerned were younger than those who expressed anxieties on their behalf; it often seemed hard for the children to identify the exact nature of the influence such material might have. In general, this kind of material seemed to be regarded as an unavoidable fact of life or at least of adult life. As Lysa (S, 10, P) put it:

'It's nothing like you won't see when you're older.'

Indeed, some of the girls argued that there should be equal opportunities in this respect. As Izzie (S, 12, G) proclaimed:

'It's sexist! Why don't they have pictures of men? It's not fair!'

However, several girls suggested that in fact women were less likely to be interested in such images – whereas boys were only interested in women for their bodies, rather than their personalities. However, as the girls pointed out, the 'chest or the six-pack' featured in their teenage magazines was not equivalent to the topless models in the newspapers. As Lara (S, 14, P) suggested:

'If there was a man in the newspaper with his, like, dick out, like maybe there would be a lot of complaints. But if there is a woman with just her tits out, there wouldn't be.'

Men only?

The majority of children made a distinction between Page 3 images and pornography, although there was some debate about where this line was to be drawn. A similar debate recurred in their discussions of young men's magazines such as Loaded and FHM, which were read by some of the 14 and 17-year-old boys. While there was a lingering sense of shame or embarrassment surrounding these magazines – which was often promoted by parental (or at least maternal) disapproval – the boys firmly distinguished them from 'real' pornography.

Thus, the boys argued that these magazines did not:

'Show you all the dirty actions and what people do.'
(Seamus, N, 14, P)

and pointed out that they contained material other than sexy pictures. However, several of the girls argued that the articles in the magazines were simply a respectable pretext, and few had much hesitation in describing magazines such as FHM as '*porn*', or in expressing their disapproval.

In our interviews, many boys (and several girls) said that they had seen material that they regarded as pornography – although they claimed that this was more often '*by accident*' than design. Even in the youngest age group, boys described how pornographic images had appeared on their computers without being requested. Clint (S, 10, P) attributed a touching human failing to his web browser in this respect:

'I asked Jeeves where I could find PC cheats [for games] *and I don't think he understood and it come up with a page of naked women and all things like that.'*

Others described how they had been sent unsolicited images in e-mail attachments or via chat rooms; others had come across magazines discarded in the street, in their older brother's bedroom or in the newsagent's shop. While there may have been grounds for exaggeration here, the children's descriptions certainly suggest that some of the material in question was hard-core.

However, some of the older boys did describe how they had actively looked for porn, often with their friends. Adrian (N, 17, P) described how he would visit porn sites while downloading music, describing it as:

'A bit of an education, if you haven't seen stuff like that before.'

Richard (S, 17, P) said he had looked for porn on the internet '*for a laugh*', but expressed frustration at the way it was then sometimes impossible to escape. However, these boys still wished to distance themselves from the 'sad old perverts' whom they perceived as regular users of porn. Their own use, as they described it, was motivated by curiosity and occasional desperation – as Jay (S, 17, P) put it:

'Desperate times can need desperate measures, you know.'

In some cases, porn viewing was described as a group activity: this was seen by Richard (S, 17, P) as '*more of a laugh*', although he acknowledged that the laughter was partly a response to feeling '*uncomfortable*'. Kim and Abigail (N, 12, P) described how boys would circulate porn images in their classroom, and use them to harass girls and to disrupt lessons. For them, boys' use of porn simply confirmed their own degraded status:

'I think boys are more, like, into it than girls are, because boys are really disgusting.'

However, other boys saw this kind of activity as a symptom of immaturity. Seamus and Neville (N, 14, P), for example, described how they had been impressed by the kind of material that was circulated in the playground at junior school, not least because it was so obviously forbidden by teachers and parents, but claimed that they now saw this as '*pointless*' and '*immature*'.

Pornography was often described as 'dirty' and 'rude', as were the people who used it. However, many stopped short of total condemnation. As we have noted, pornography was seen to satisfy aspects of boys' curiosity – as Adrian (N, 17, P) acknowledged in referring to it as '*a bit of an education*'. Likewise, Phil and Henry (N, 14, P), who had run up an enormous telephone bill accessing porn on the internet, had described their motivations to their parents in similar terms:

'I said, "Well, I'm sort of curious and wanting to know a bit more."'

Even those who condemned pornography as 'sick', or claimed not to like it themselves, were inclined to regard it as a fact of life. Here, as in several other areas, the children tended to represent their own generation as more 'relaxed' and open than their parents.

Advertising

Several of these issues were addressed more directly when it came to looking at advertisements. We asked the children to look at a series of advertisements, including some that had been the subject of recent adjudications by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA). All featured male or female bodies in various states of undress.

The children's discussions were characterised by a complex blend of fascination and disgust. The 10-year-olds, in particular, professed to be quite repelled and shocked by some of them – most notably the YSL 'Opium' advertisement featuring the naked Sophie Dahl. Here again, the key issue was one of decency – the question of **how much** naked flesh it is acceptable to show – rather than with ideology – e.g. whether these images are 'sexist'. However, the younger children often appeared quite confused about the sexual connotations of the images, not recognising them as clearly as the older children did. In the case of a Lee Jeans advertisement, it was only the oldest children who recognised the sexual charge associated with the image of the 'dominatrix'.

As such, one might argue, younger children may be less at risk of any potential harm such images might be seen to cause. Thus, Tom (S, 17, G) argued that very young children (in his estimation, six-year-olds) wouldn't '*analyse*' such material '*properly*', but that older children (like his nine-year-old cousin), who already knew about such matters, would realise what the advertisements were getting at.

Nevertheless, for all age groups, the issue of the public display of such images – and the possibility that they might be witnessed by '*little children*' – was a key concern. The typical scenario was one in which, as Joseph (S, 12, G) put it, children would see the image on a billboard and ask their parents '*uncomfortable questions*'. Nevertheless, the children did not wish to be identified with the complainants. Those who complained about such material were condemned as '*opinionated middle-aged women*' who '*take things too seriously*' and '*just like a good nag*' (Richard and Jay, S, 17, P).

Throughout their discussions of this material, there appeared to be a strict heterosexual 'logic'. Men, it was argued, could look at pictures of women – that was perfectly normal. Women could also look at pictures of men – it was only fair that they should have the same opportunities. Indeed, if anything, the girls in our interviews were more comfortable in this respect than the boys. While the boys may have been concerned that '*drooling*' over pictures of naked women would meet with disapproval, the girls showed little restraint in expressing admiration for the '*six-packs*' and '*hunks*' on display. In both cases, the only possible problem was one of '*going too far*', by displaying an undue interest in images deemed too 'dirty' or pornographic.

On the other hand, however, men definitely could not look at pictures of men. Thus, in the case of the Levi's 'Twisted to Fit' advertisement some of the boys were quite uncomfortable with the image of a half-naked man at its centre. The concern here was not so much one of propriety: although several children noted the sexual suggestiveness, most agreed that this was relatively mild. Several of the girls were quite unashamedly enthusiastic about the man's 'six-pack'. However, for some boys, the image of the man was unsettling. Theo (S, 12, G) actually covered his eyes when the advertisement was revealed to the group. When asked to explain this, he claimed it was because, '*I'm a man*' and he later added, '*I'm not gay*'. In most cases, though, the fact that there was also a woman in the picture reassured them about the basic heterosexuality of the scenario. As Henry (N, 12, G) put it, the message was: '*Wear Levi's and women will come on to you*.' This reassurance was less readily available in relation to another of the advertisements for Calvin Klein underwear, which featured a somewhat androgynous model clad only in brief underpants. This image seemed to provoke something akin to panic in the boys: some squirmed with embarrassment or exclaimed in outrage, while others simply refused to look at it. To some extent, the boys' anxiety was to do with being **seen** to display an undue interest in such images, and hence with the possibility that others might accuse you of being gay. Yet some boys appeared to believe that simply looking at such images would, '*Turn you gay*.'

By contrast, there appeared to be less danger for women in looking at pictures of women. Women, we were repeatedly told, might find other women attractive, without them necessarily being lesbian, but there was simply no way that men would feel the same way about other men, unless they were gay. As some of the girls suggested – and as several boys agreed – girls were '*more comfortable just looking at naked women*'. As Pierre (S, 14, G) put it:

> *'Women don't get embarrassed that easily.'*

However, part of the reason for this was seen to lie in the very ubiquity of images of women. As Holly (S, 14, G) put it:

> *'You can't get away from it, can you? It's everywhere.'*

Music videos

Similar issues also arose in relation to three music videos that were included on our tape: Britney Spears' *I'll be a Slave to You*' Robbie Williams' *Rock DJ* and the video of *Lady Marmalade* made to accompany the film *Moulin Rouge*.

In the case of the first two, the children were aware of the publicity surrounding the private lives of the stars. Britney Spears' public stance on virginity – she had claimed that she would be '*saving herself*' until marriage – was widely questioned and mocked. Several children argued that her position was incompatible with her sexual public image, and that she was simply a hypocrite – although others recognised that she was now attempting to reposition her image in order to attract an older male audience. As such, it was argued, she was a poor '*role model*' for children – although here again, the children who were seen to be subject to influence were definitely younger than our interviewees themselves.

While the younger children rejected Britney's scantily-clad appearance as simply '*tarty*', some of the older ones were also critical of what they saw as the sexist values of the song. As Lisa (N, 14, G) put it:

> *'Do you know how ages ago all women should respect men and do everything for them? It's basically what she's trying to say.'*

This fed into a widely expressed view that the media were simply 'selling sex', as Henry (N, 12, G) protested (perhaps a little too strongly, given his apparent interest in her image):

> *'She's selling us her looks basically. She's . . . I think she's not got anything in between her ears and, um . . . and her voice isn't really that good either.'*

Robbie Williams was also well-known to the children – although the video we used is in some respects an ironic critique of Robbie's own public image as a 'sex god'. However, his sex appeal was by no means uniformly confirmed by the girls, some of whom claimed to find his hairy chest '*disgusting*' and expressed disappointment about his lack of a '*six-pack*'. For the boys, this video was predictably more problematic. As with the Calvin Klein advertisement, some attempted to displace their anxieties onto Robbie himself, claiming that he was *'gay'* – although the self-evident heterosexuality of the basic scenario (and of Robbie's 'real-life' persona) undermined some of this threat.

The *Moulin Rouge* video also proved threatening for some of the boys, albeit in a rather different way. The video featured four singers/rappers in a whorehouse, performing on stage and being dressed in corsets, suspenders, silk underwear and fishnet tights by various maids and attendants. Responses among the younger boys verged on the riotous. One group of 10-year-old boys shrieked and covered their eyes, and two literally hid under the table. '*Don't look at the screen! Don't look at the screen!*' they shouted. The issue was not simply that the image was too overtly and obviously sexual (and thus '*disgusting*'), but also that it appeared to revel in the display of active *female* sexuality.

Nevertheless, as with Britney Spears, it was only the older children who seemed to recognise many of the sexual connotations of the video – or what Tom (N, 17, G) referred to as its '*raunchy sort of French old Victorian brothel style*'. The younger children could not explain where the women were, for example, or why some of them were holding whips. Likewise, in the case of Britney, some of the older children suggested that there was a '*kinky*' aspect to the scenario – '*It's like S-and-M, submissive, tie me up*' (Jeff, N, 17, G) – which the younger ones did not mention. Here again, the older children were more aware of how 'sex' can be culturally signified – in effect, of a history of cultural representations of sexuality. For younger children, the concern was more straightforwardly one of decency – of how much flesh is on display.

As this implies, what viewers perceive to be 'sexual' depends both upon their knowledge of sex in real life and on their experience of sexual representation. Children use the media not only in learning 'facts' about sex, but also in learning what **counts** as sexual in the first place.

Conclusion

In responding to the public debate about the regulation of sexual imagery, the children were keen to define themselves as self-regulating consumers and to displace such concerns on to others less competent than themselves, although, in some cases, they clearly failed to recognise the sexual dimensions of the material in the first place. Of course, this does not mean that the media have no effects on them – but it should cause us to question some of the assertions that are often made in this respect. Our research suggests that arguments about media effects need to take greater account of the question of **understanding**. What children might learn from the media depends to a large extent upon what they already know – and, to paraphrase a popular cliché, it may well be that what you do not understand cannot hurt you.

We found surprisingly little evidence here of 'feminist' criticism, even when faced with such familiar targets as Page 3 pin-ups. This may mean that such images have become so naturalised – and their values so comprehensively internalised – that any criticism has become impossible. It may also suggest that the media have changed to the point where such traditional feminist criticism has become irrelevant – or alternatively that such images actually occupy a relatively marginal role in the formation of gendered identities and attitudes.

Finally, we have found that children's responses to these images conform – or are made to conform, through a variety of social pressures – to a powerfully heterosexual 'logic'. Yet this is very far from being a secure and guaranteed process; from this perspective, we might even suggest that the media play a greater role in **disturbing** gender and sexual identities than they do in confirming them.

4. Confessions: talk shows, problems and celebrity gossip

It is still comparatively rare to find explicit representations of sexual behaviour in the mainstream media – and certainly in the media most children are likely to encounter. Of course, there is plenty of mild foreplay and strategic removal of garments. But even in prime-time television dramas, there is much more talk about sex than visual representation of it (Kunkel *et al*. 2001). If anything, it is the compulsion to **talk** about sex – rather than to display or witness it – that could be seen to dominate the contemporary media. In this section, we consider the children's responses to three media genres that particularly exemplify this: television talk shows, problem pages in teenage girls' magazines and celebrity gossip in the tabloid press.

Talk shows

Television talk shows were not a favoured genre among the young people in our sample. However, most appeared quite familiar with the conventions and routines of different types of talk shows, which might suggest that they were more interested in them than they were prepared to admit. In general, there was greater enthusiasm for the more confrontational style of shows such as *Jerry Springer* than the more sedate approach of UK programmes such as *Trisha* and *Kilroy*. (And this may also be reflected in the fact that the US shows tend to be scheduled to catch teenage viewers in the late afternoon, while the British shows are screened during the daytime.) Both boys and girls argued that boys mainly enjoyed the fighting on the US shows and that programmes such as *Trisha* were more '*for women*', although in fact several girls also expressed enthusiasm for this aspect, along with the '*swearing*', arguing that it was generally regarded as '*funny*' rather than serious.

When asked directly, a few were prepared to agree that such shows might be educational, and offer some kind of reassurance to viewers. As Jeff (N, 17, G) put it:

> *'Talk shows are there to inform, but also help people who might have had similar problems, saying, "You're not alone here, these people know exactly what you're going through."'*

However, the word that was most frequently used to describe them – and particularly shows such as *Jerry Springer* – was '*entertainment*', closely followed by '*funny*'. Much of the pleasure clearly derived from the element of voyeurism – from the opportunity to laugh at people's misfortunes and peculiarities, which might in real life be taken seriously. The participants in talk shows were very clearly defined as 'other' and this appeared to permit a kind of **schadenfreude** i.e. a pleasure in others' suffering and humiliation.

This approach was premised on being able to adopt a very distanced perspective. Of course, this kind of response is encouraged by the interview situation, although it is also encouraged by the nature of some contemporary talk shows themselves. At least in the United States, the genre underwent a remarkable shift in the mid 1990s with the advent of a new wave of talk

shows, partly aimed at a younger, less female-dominated audience. Older shows, such as *Donahue* and *Oprah*, were partly intended as a form of therapeutic self-help. By contrast, the newer shows such as *Ricki Lake* and *Jerry Springer* focus on sensational themes (often including crime and sexual 'nonconformity') and on verbal and sometimes physical confrontations between the guests. These shows address an ironic, 'playful' viewer, who refuses to take them completely seriously; this scepticism has been encouraged by widely circulated allegations concerning the use of actors or otherwise fake guests.

Some of these differences were certainly apparent in the children's responses to the two extracts from talk shows that we invited them to discuss. The extract from a British show, *Trisha*, which (like most British shows) largely adheres to the therapeutic style of older-generation programmes, was condemned by many as '*boring*'and '*too serious*'. By contrast, there was more enthusiasm for an extract from *Jerry Springer*. However, the children's discussion of *Trisha* was much more emotionally engaged than it was in the case of *Jerry Springer*. They spent longer talking about the extract and were more interested in inferring the motivations of the two guests and in making judgements about their behaviour.

The discussion of the *Jerry Springer* extract was quite different in tone. Despite many children's apparent enthusiasm for the show – and particularly for the elements of ritual and confrontation – it was also widely condemned as '*trashy*' and '*fake*'. In making these judgements, the children repeatedly drew attention to the **American** origin of the programme. The programme was just:

> *'A bunch of Americans like this in each other's face, yelling and swearing and everything.'*
> (Courtney, N, 12, G)

or as Naomi (N, 14, G) argued:

> *'They're all inbred and just violent and aggressive and they're just stupid, they just sleep around with anyone.'*

There was also a general view of the programme as 'fake' or 'set up'. Several children asserted that the guests were in fact actors, or alternatively that they were '*faking their problems*' in order to get on television. Only at one point, where one of the guests appeared to break into tears, were they inclined to question this – although some suggested that this scene, too, was somehow faked. Despite the greater intensity of this scene, as compared to the restraint of the *Trisha* sequence, the children's discussion here was quite dispassionate: there was little interest in probing the psychological motivations of the characters or making moral judgements of their behaviour. Ultimately, as Joseph (S, 12, G) argued, the problems on such shows may serve merely as a pretext for the real business:

> *'I don't think* [viewers] *pay much attention to what's actually going on – they're just waiting for the fight.'*

Ultimately, few children appeared to believe that talk shows served any particularly valuable functions for those who appeared on them or for those who watched them. Many argued

that there were better ways of sorting out your personal problems and that appearing on a talk show would probably only make them worse. For some of the younger children, in particular, this crossing of the boundary between the public and the private was quite problematic. As Melanie (N, 10, G) put it:

> *'I don't think they should have these talk shows. I think they should just tell them privately without letting the whole world know about it.'*

However, few of the older children appeared to experience much discomfort about the apparent voyeurism involved. As Matthew (N, 14, G) asserted:

> *'It's good watching 'em humiliate themselves in front of thousands of people.'*

So to what extent might these shows be seen as a source of learning about personal relationships? When asked directly, many of the children rejected this suggestion out of hand: the shows were self-evidently '*entertainment*' and nothing more. The hosts' attempts at teaching e.g. in the case of *Jerry Springer's* 'final thought', or *Trisha's* interventions – were mocked or criticised. Some children hesitantly suggested that the programmes might be offering negative examples, and thus implicitly be providing warnings about how **not** to behave. Yet part of the point of the newer talk shows is that viewers are not required to take moral or psychological issues seriously. On the contrary, the extremes of private life – and, indeed, of private suffering – are held up as public spectacle, to be ridiculed and summarily judged. This raises some interesting questions about the functions and effects of such programmes that are worthy of further investigation.

Problem pages

When compared with talk shows such as *Jerry Springer*, the educational – or, at least, advisory – functions of problem pages are much more overt. Yet this was not necessarily the way in which the children in our sample claimed to read them. On the contrary, the distanced – sceptical, but also occasionally voyeuristic – perspective adopted in relation to the talk shows was largely reproduced here.

Few of the youngest girls in our sample were regular readers of teenage magazines. For those who were, the problem pages were seen as a potentially valuable source of information – particularly about aspects of life they had yet to experience themselves. However, even in this age group, there was an emerging scepticism; by the time we reach the older girls, many of whom were regular readers of magazines such as Bliss, Sugar and Cosmo Girl, this was the most striking aspect of the discussion. Like talk shows, problem pages were frequently described as '*funny*' and '*entertaining*'. Several children suggested that the problems were '*made up*' in order to fill column inches; a couple even claimed to know people who had written in with fictional problems '*for a laugh*'. The problems themselves were often described as '*ridiculous*' or merely trivial. Like the guests on the talk shows, it was argued that people who wrote in to problem pages must be '*sad*' (i.e. pathetic). As in Mary Kehily's (1999) study, the girls claimed to be much more interested in reading the problems than the answers – even though they agreed that the advice could be useful for some. There were several well-founded reasons advanced for this. Several argued that the advice was too

generalised: there was insufficient detail, either to be sure that the advice was useful or (as a reader) to enable you to apply it to your own life. As with appearing on the talk shows, few seemed to believe that writing in would actually help with your problems. As Kelly (N, 14, P) said:

> *'I don't see the point of writing in really, because, you know, they don't know you, so they can't really help you, can they? They don't know what's truthfully happened, do they?'*

The question of age-appropriateness was also raised in several instances. Rollo and Mia (S, 12, P) had bought Sugar, but had stopped reading it on the grounds that it was for older readers. According to Rollo:

> *'It's more advanced, like, "I've had sex with my boyfriend and I've done all this dirty stuff with my boyfriend."'*

and you're like:

> *'They shouldn't put that in the magazine. Even for 16-year-olds, they should not put that in a magazine.'*

Interestingly, Melissa (S, 17, P) suggested that the age at which particular problems were appearing had fallen over the years, for example in the case of girls worrying about sleeping with boyfriends.

To some extent, refusing to take the material seriously may be seen as a consequence of the interview context, although it was also reflected in the children's accounts of how the magazines were read. Several girls described how they would look through the magazines with friends, reading the problem letters aloud and laughing about '*how stupid it is*'. However, some of the older children suggested that, in retrospect, this collective mockery might have disguised their embarrassment:

> *'We all laughed about 'em. But then, I think, like, deep inside we was all really thinking, "Oh, what if that was me?" – all taking it in, but no one would really talk about* [it].*'* (Della, S, 17, P).

Nevertheless, several acknowledged that problem pages might have a valuable educational function, particularly when compared with other potential sources. The anonymity of this form of communication was seen by many as particularly important in this respect (and, here, there is an obvious difference from the talk shows). As Lori (S, 14, P) suggested, people might write in to a magazine:

> *'Cause they thought they haven't got anyone else to talk to, or they can't confide in anyone else, so they ask someone else that they don't know, and there isn't like any strings attached to it after.'*

Several children spoke of the potential difficulty of discussing problems with parents or doctors, although some were still concerned about the possibility of being unmasked if they were to write to a magazine.

In the public eye

Few of the children were regular readers of newspapers, although – as the scrapbooks crammed with pictures of Page 3 models showed – the tabloids, in particular, were generally available, particularly in the working-class children's homes. There was a general argument, partly made on the basis of the nude models, that these newspapers were aimed at men, although the element of show-business gossip was seen by some as being of greater interest to women.

While there was certainly a shared pleasure to be gained from this kind of gossip, there was also widespread distrust of its truthfulness. To some extent, this was quite generalised, but in several cases, it involved an understanding of how stories could be invented or 'faked'. Several children asserted that the newspapers frequently '*make up a load of rubbish*' or '*blow things out of proportion*' and some were also aware of how images could be manipulated.

This scepticism reflected the fact that newspapers were seen as essentially a money-making business. As Reena (N, 14, G) put it:

> *'The newspapers don't care about people's feelings – it's about the ratings and how many papers they sell.'*

Likewise, sexual stories and images were heavily featured on the front pages '*just so people buy it*'. For some, the focus on gossip about the private lives of celebrities reflected a dangerous abdication of responsibility on the part of the press – or, indeed, of the celebrities themselves. Some argued that celebrities were expected to '*set a good example*' or to act as '*role models*', although there was some doubt about whether they were actually seen in that way.

The fact remained, however, that many of the children were interested in finding out about the private lives of celebrities (or at least some of them) and enjoyed discussing them, whether or not they believed the rumours were true. As Ethan (N, 12, G) put it:

> *'It's like Harry Potter – you don't believe it, but you still read it . . . 'cause you enjoy it.'*

Both in the interviews and in the diaries, many were keen to exchange new gossip about celebrities. Snippets of supposedly authentic information were typically introduced with '*Did you know . . .' Have you heard . . .' or 'Is it true that . . .*' for which the source was invariably the media.

There was a similar degree of ambivalence when it came to discussing specific stories we had selected. For example, one featured paparazzi photographs of Kylie Minogue. The children were mostly well aware that the images had been taken without her consent – and, most

probably, without payment – and several suggested that she could sue the newspaper on these grounds. There was general agreement that this kind of journalism constituted an '*invasion of privacy*'. However, others argued that this was simply the price of fame. As Lori (S, 14, G) put it:

> *'She's famous, so she should expect it.'*

Others argued that she would be unlikely to be too concerned about the pictures, on the grounds that they were simply extra publicity. As Theo and Darren (S, 12, G) pointed out:

> *'She just gets more money when she gets her picture taken of her half naked . . . and more men get attracted to her. Some of them will buy her CD, buy her posters.'*

A rather different example, which was introduced by several of the children rather than by us, concerned the model Jordan's intention to have the forthcoming birth of her baby transmitted live on the internet. In this instance, the courting of publicity was seen to have '*gone too far*': it was generally condemned as a '*publicity stunt*', or as '*sick*' – and as something that was just being done for the money. In this instance, there was general agreement that the boundary between the private and the public was being violated, and that, as Ethan and Seth (N, 12, P) put it, this was:

> *'A private thing . . . between you and your boyfriend or husband and your family.'*

However, this was one case where few children expressed any doubt that the story was true – although the fact that they evidently disliked Jordan may have made them more inclined to believe it.

This kind of ambivalence may be characteristic of readers' relationships with the popular tabloids, and with celebrity gossip, in particular. On the one hand, the children clearly wanted to see or know the gossip, particularly where it related to people whom they admired or lusted after – or alternatively despised. Yet there was also a kind of resentment, which was expressed in an apparently uncaring pleasure in others' suffering: they apparently wanted these glamourous people to suffer, perhaps because they envied their wealth and good fortune, and because they knew that they would never enjoy the kinds of lives they lead. In some cases, this led to a kind of moral condemnation – a censorious rejection of the irresponsibility of the celebrities and their failure to conform to the standards required of would-be '*role models*'. And yet, underlying all this, there was a doubt about the veracity of it all – a suspicion that perhaps the stories were invented or at least exaggerated after all. In this respect, the media may allow us to have our cake and eat it: we can – if we wish – revel in the details of others' private lives, while simultaneously deploring and condemning them.

Conclusion

On the face of it, much of the material we have discussed in this chapter did not seem to be taken seriously. As some of the children acknowledged, much of the mockery and hilarity was merely a disguise for their embarrassment – and it was possible that it could be taken

much more seriously when encountered in private. Even so, the responses the children recorded in the more intimate medium of their diaries were not significantly less sceptical or satirical. As we have suggested, much of this material does not **demand** to be taken seriously – and, indeed, some of it seems to demand precisely the opposite.

This raises interesting questions about the potential consequences in terms of young people's learning. There may be an element of perceived 'liberation' about the uncovering of the hidden secrets of sexual life. Making it possible to talk in public about such matters can be seen to remove the taboos that cause private suffering and fear. Yet if the arena in which such discussion is conducted is essentially one of mockery and ridicule – and if audiences seem disinclined to regard what they see and read as true – the nature and extent of that benefit is certainly debatable.

5. Television drama

Television drama is, undoubtedly, an important source of informal learning about love, sex and relationships, and, in some instances, it can set out explicitly to teach. In this section, we focus specifically on this process of teaching and learning in soap operas, situation comedies and children's/teen dramas. As we shall indicate, the extent to which television drama is capable of teaching particular messages (whether 'good' or 'bad') largely depends upon how far it is seen to be plausible or realistic. Taking a medium that is perceived as 'entertainment' and recruiting it for the purposes of 'education' is a strategy that, we suggest, is fraught with difficulties.

Soap operas

Television soap operas have long been celebrated and criticised for their emphasis on personal relationships. Much of the genre's appeal lies in its exploration of the intricacies of romance and family, and yet moral conservatives have frequently condemned what they regard as soap operas' unremitting focus on the seamier side of human relationships. In our research, the sexual content of the storylines emerged as a topic of considerable fascination for the large majority, particularly the girls. As Olivia (S, 17, P) pointed out, much of the appeal of soap operas was the fact that:

> *'You come into school* [the next day] *and then talk about who's sleeping with who.'*

Despite their enthusiasm, however, it appeared that some of the younger children did not quite understand what they were watching. As Rebecca (N, 10, P) confessed, in relation to a story about sexually transmitted disease:

> *'Most of it I'm just really confused about, 'cause I don't understand most of it.'*

while Jay (S, 17, P) recalled:

> *'I wasn't even sure what exactly infidelity was when I was 10 or 11. I was like, "What's all that about? Are they just like good friends or something like that?"'*

Nevertheless, we found a marked degree of ambivalence here. On the one hand, there were instances of intense emotional empathy with the characters. Several children described feeling sad when favourite characters had died or relationships had broken up. Alma (S, 10, P) even said that her mother had forbidden her to watch *EastEnders* because she had been so upset (at the age of six) by Melanie jilting Ian on their wedding day. On the other hand, there was a great deal of criticism of soap operas on the grounds of their lack of realism. Part of the concern here was to do with the pace and repetition of narrative incident, not least in the frequency of 'affairs' between the characters. As Grant (S, 17, P) put it:

> *'You get relationships, sooner or later one of them's going to have an affair, just to make a better story line.'*

These criticisms were also reinforced by the children's knowledge of the production process. As with advertisements and music videos, several children recognised that 'sex sells', and could be used to build audiences – even where the stories were seen to have an educational function. Thus, Heather and Caitlin (N, 12, P) argued that the story of Mark's HIV was '*another storyline to get people interested, glued to the TV, so they can get more money*' – although they seemed rather vague about how what they called the '*money business*' of television actually operated.

Nevertheless, the children recognised that soap operas had genuine educational intentions and that these were of different kinds. Some were relatively covert or implicit. Thus, soap operas were seen to promote values such as fidelity, respect and trust – not least by showing the consequences for people's relationships when these values were abandoned. As Glenn (S, 17, P) pointed out, affairs in *EastEnders* always ended in tragedy. Izzie (S, 12, P) argued that the programme taught you not to '*give in to temptation*', while Clint and Leo (S, 10, P) agreed that the programme taught the dangers of '*two-timing*'. These judgements seemed to imply that morality was not primarily a matter of following externally imposed rules, but of taking personal responsibility for ensuring your own fulfilment.

In addition to these covert messages, the children identified much more overt teachings relating to issues such as drugs, HIV-AIDS and teenage pregnancy. Thus, we were repeatedly told that *EastEnders* was '*warning*' children, in particular about the dangers of teenage sex:

> *'Don't get pregnant if you're a teenager.'*
> (Ethan, N, 12, P)

> *'Certainly don't have under-aged sex – and you should use a condom.'*
> (Wesley, S, 12, P)

Richard (S, 17, P) said that he had first learned about HIV-AIDS from *EastEnders*, while several girls argued that they had gleaned more general messages about safety from soap operas. Rollo and Mia (S, 12, P) said they preferred learning about such issues from television than from teenage magazines, where explicit information often appeared unexpectedly.

However, several children argued that the programmes were preaching at them and displayed some impatience with this. Several suggested that they were sacrificing realism in order to reinforce particular messages. Sharmaine and Noelle (S, 12, P), for example, implied that it was too predictable for teenage sex always to result in pregnancy. Others argued that this educational approach was essentially incompatible with the soap opera form, which was essentially about '*entertainment*'. Tom (N, 17, P) was particularly forceful in his criticism of this approach:

> *'It's just so obvious. It's like the words have been put in the mouth from social workers . . . it's like they feel they're obliged to give this moral thing.'*

As Chris Barker (1998) has indicated, young people's moral engagement with soap operas takes two main forms. On the one hand, they condemn '*inappropriate sexuality*', both in

terms of its representation (where it is seen as too explicit) and in terms of the '*immoral*' actions of the characters themselves. From this perspective, the emphasis is very much on **blaming** individual characters for their moral shortcomings. On the other hand, they also seek to understand the characters' behaviour in the context of their social circumstances and relationships. The emphasis here is more on **explaining** why characters behave the way they do – and often on '*forgiving*' them for their misdeeds.

In our research, certain characters were consistently blamed. *EastEnders*' Janine, for example, was dismissed as merely '*stupid*' or '*a slapper*' for selling her body to get money for drugs. Such stories were seen as '*cautionary tales*', that might have come straight from a Victorian moral primer. In other instances, however, the motivations for the characters' actions were less clear. While this uncertainty encouraged speculation about future plotlines, it also promoted moral debate about what **should** happen. For example, in debating whether particular relationships would last, the children were rehearsing ideas about what makes for good relationships – albeit filtered through their understanding of the conventions of the genre.

In general, the teaching offered by soap operas is more effective where it is less overt – where it encourages viewers to make their own judgements, rather than simply commanding their assent. Viewers may be happy to learn from such programmes, but they do not wish to feel they are being taught.

Comedy

The educational value of soap operas depends to some degree on their perceived realism: in order to learn from them, viewers must take them seriously on some level. Like soap operas, situation comedies may convey both overt and covert educational messages. Nevertheless, the defining characteristic of comedy is precisely that it is not to be taken seriously. So to what extent might comedies perform a similar educational function?

With the exception of a few older boys, the US sitcom *Friends* was universally popular with the children in our sample. As Liesbeth de Block (*1998*) suggests, comedies such as *Friends* and *Men Behaving Badly* seem to be popular with children partly because of their focus on personal relationships within non-family settings. On the one hand, the characters have some of the desirable trappings of grown-ups – such as independence, money and control over their own space and time. Yet, unlike characters in more serious adult soap operas or dramas, the characters are not portrayed (or, indeed, perceived by children) as particularly mature. Their appeal rests largely on the fact that they are adults behaving like children.

In this research, some children appeared to see the lives of the characters in *Friends* as a kind of idealised fantasy of their own futures. Yet their enthusiasm was tempered by a recognition that this fantasy was far from unproblematic. Interestingly, several children criticised the characters for being incompetent and '*childish*'. As Caitlin (N, 12, G) put it:

> *'They don't seem to be able to look after themselves.'*

Many argued that the programme was unrealistic and that real people in their twenties did not live like that. Interestingly, the *Friends* characters who were most popular were the least psychologically plausible, Joey and Phoebe – who were variously described as '*crazy*', '*dopey*', '*stupid*' and '*thick*'. Yet this unreality was generally seen as a precondition of comedy as a form. As Joshua (N, 14, G) succinctly put it:

'That's why it's funny, 'cause it's unreal.'

When asked, several children attempted to identify 'messages' in the show, particularly to do with the presence of lesbian and gay characters (who appeared or were mentioned in both the episodes we used). Rebecca (N, 10, G) and Sean (N, 12, G) both noted that there were relatively few such characters in other programmes, while Richard (N, 17, G) argued that such scenes could '*open your eyes with humour*'. In practice, however, this was clearly not what their experience of *Friends* was about. As Melissa (S, 17, G) argued, you did not expect to '*come out learning something*' – '*it's just there for entertainment, isn't it?*'

There were similar responses to another programme included on our videotape, an episode of *The Simpsons*. Several children claimed that *The Simpsons* was realistic, despite the fact that it was a cartoon: '*It shows what happens in families*,' said Courtney (N, 12, G). In general, however, they rejected the idea that the programme should be taken seriously, or that it contained 'messages' of the kind we were seeking. Indeed, it was precisely it's **lack** of serious intent that accounted for its appeal. As Matthew (N, 14, G) argued:

'It's easy to watch. You don't have to think about it.'

Of course, it would be wrong to conclude that people do not learn from such programmes just because they claim that they do not take them seriously. Depending on how one chooses to interpret it, *The Simpsons* might be seen as an attack on the sanctity of the American family – or alternatively as an ironic but ultimately sentimental reaffirmation of family values. And for all its apparent liberalism about gay and lesbian relationships, it could be argued that *Friends* reinforces a narrow conception of heterosexual gender roles. Yet the problem with such arguments – as the children in our study repeatedly reminded us – is that they are in danger of forgetting that such programmes are, precisely, **comedies**.

Teaching through drama

Finally, we consider the children's responses to three programmes targeted at a children's or teen audience – all of which contain more or less overt 'messages' about love, sex and relationships.

We included on our videotape an episode of *Grange Hill*, the United Kingdom's longest-running children's drama programme, focusing on the relationship between two school students, Leah and Tom. After Leah and Tom have sex in a bedroom at a friend's party, Leah makes it clear that she did so reluctantly and attends sessions with a rape counsellor.

The children's discussions of this storyline were characterised by some quite intense moral debates. There were heated discussions about whether Tom had in fact raped Leah and what 'rape' actually meant. Many children argued on both sides, agreeing that in some ways it was rape, while in others it was not.

This debate was invited by the programme itself, not least by the comments and criticisms of the other characters who surrounded Tom and Leah. Yet, as in the case of *EastEnders*, uncertainty about the characters' motivations or intentions was a crucial generator of debate. This uncertainty was compounded by the fact that, of course, the programme had not actually shown them having sex. This left open several crucial questions – for example, why Tom had failed to ask Leah and why Leah had failed to resist.

Ultimately, some of the children were concerned to allocate blame: either it was Leah's fault for not saying 'no' (or for going into the bedroom in the first place) or it was Tom's for not asking. Yet the majority argued that both were to blame; several claimed that they were '*on both sides*' of the debate. The children's discussions thus invoked broader assumptions, both about how and why people behave the way they do and about what was moral or ethical. In Barker's (1998) terms, this story invited 'explaining' rather than 'blaming' – both because of the diversity of views presented in the programme and because the characters' motivations were left uncertain. While some children read the 'message' as a straightforward warning of the '*just say no*' variety, others perceived it as more complex and ambivalent. The programme 'worked' pedagogically because it enabled the children to think the situation through and to empathise with the characters' dilemmas, rather than simply offering abstract warnings.

There was a striking contrast in this respect with the children's responses to an episode of the US teen drama *Dawson's Creek*, which featured a similar storyline. This programme was widely dismissed as '*boring*' and '*ridiculous*' and several children described how they had laughed out loud while watching particular scenes. The primary grounds for criticism were to do with the programme's lack of realism. For most, the setting and the characters were quite '*far-fetched*'. The actors, it was argued, were '*too beautiful*', but also far too old for the parts they were playing; the script was unnecessarily literary and the sex scenes were ridiculously coy.

All these elements detracted from the programme's educational potential. The children detected several 'messages' in the episode we selected, particularly to do with the virtues of virginity – or 'true love waits'. There were also rather more ambiguous 'safe sex' messages: the fact that the boys carried condoms was a warning to '*be prepared*', but it seemed to reinforce the view that, as Reena (N, 14, G) suggested, boys are '*always up for it*'.

However, several children clearly felt that the programme was preaching at them. While it contained '*good messages*', they were conveyed in a '*patronising*' and '*obvious*' manner. Harvey (N, 17, G) argued that, as in some other teen dramas, the message was '*rammed down your throat*' and that this '*insulted your intelligence*'. Others complained that the problems in such programmes were always too quickly resolved and that they were dealt with in a humourless way – an approach that was seen to be particularly true of 'American' shows.

The final programme here adopted a much less overtly pedagogical approach. *As If* is a Channel 4 drama series that follows the interconnected lives and relationships of a group of characters in their late teens and early twenties. The episode we used – only with the Year 12 children – focused on the issue of infidelity, particularly as it affected one gay relationship.

As If was generally well received, particularly by the middle-class teenagers. It was described as a '*realistic*' representation of young people and as psychologically plausible. Several young people compared the programme favourably with *Dawson's Creek* in this respect. According to Harvey (N, 17, G):

> 'As If *could be a documentary about the life of these people, or like a fly on the wall and, you know,* Dawson's Creek *is just false, it's just so obvious.'*

For many of the young people, *As If* had a distinct message, to do with the acceptability of gay relationships. As Jon (S, 17, G) put it:

> *'It's showing . . . there is actually love and feeling and emotion in gay relationships and it's not just like a sex thing.'*

In general, the middle-class young people saw the '*message*' as being to do with tolerance: the programme was promoting the idea that gay people were '*just like us*', rather than dangerously promiscuous. Once the sexuality of the characters was discounted in this way, the message was about the importance of fidelity. As Eve (N, 17, G) put it:

> *'It's really tight of me to go off with anybody – it doesn't matter if it's a bloke or a woman, just don't do it!'*

However, some of the working-class young people – and particularly the boys – strongly rejected this message. They recognised that the programme might have been '*trying to promote homosexual awareness*', as Richard (S, 17, G) suggested and for some, this was too much to take:

> *'I mean I don't have a problem with homosexuals. I just don't particularly like watching 'em on telly. It* [makes me] *cringe.'*
> (Jay, S, 17, G).

These different views led to different estimates of the programme's pedagogic style. The middle-class young people much preferred its implicit approach to the preacherly style of *Dawson's Creek*. They liked the fact that there was no '*clear-cut ending*' and that a range of views was presented. As Jeff (N, 17, G) put it: '*It's not trying to lecture*.' However, some of the working-class young people clearly felt that the programme **was** trying to force a particular '*moral*' on them and even those who were inclined to be more sympathetic to this doubted whether it would be effective in terms of changing people's views about gay relationships.

Conclusion

Despite the fears of some conservative critics, our research suggests that questions of ethics and morality are central to how young people interpret television drama. The children here were able to engage in complex moral debates about the characters' behaviour, and their observations were informed by a strong sense of broader moral values e.g. to do with trust, mutual respect, co-operation and self-reliance.

However, the process of teaching through television is complex and difficult. Realism is crucial to the educational authority of drama, yet it is sometimes undermined by the need to entertain. Furthermore, viewers are likely to resist programmes that appear to **use** dramatic entertainment for educational ends, and this may be particularly true for children, who are so frequently on the receiving end of adults' moral warnings.

6. Family viewing

Thus far, we have explored how young people learn about love, sex and relationships from a range of media genres. In this section and the next, we look in the other direction and explore how media are used in the home and what this teaches children about family roles and relationships. As we shall argue, these roles are not assigned once and for all, but continuously contested and negotiated.

Embarrassment

Many of the parents whom we interviewed were keen to insist that they were more open with their children about sexual matters than their parents had been with them. Nonetheless, most parents and children described how they were often embarrassed when they encountered sexual material in the media in the company of family members. Many described this as a physiological experience – of sweating, shuddering, getting '*all shy*' or '*squirming*', feeling '*uncomfortable*', staring ahead as if transfixed, sitting in complete silence, and so on. However, embarrassment is clearly a **social** emotion – and, in this instance, it was not experienced when viewing alone, but was specific to viewing in company. In describing these feelings, then, children and parents were also making claims about their social identity, their status within the family and their 'maturity'.

On the one hand, some parents recounted their own embarrassment:

> *'I remember my little boy* [Joey] *when* Forrest Gump *was on. And you know the last part of the scene where he gets on, where he eventually ends up sleeping with Jenny. And bearing in mind he was only six at the time. And he was, he sat and he went, "Mum, this bit is making my willy go hard." I didn't know what to say really, do you know what I mean? "Don't watch it then." I was so embarrassed . . . I feel awful now. I should have dealt with it better.'*
> (Julie-Anne: FG5N)

Joey's reference to his physical response seems to fly in the face of ideas about childhood innocence, thus contributing to Julie-Anne's confusion. Yet her regret touches on another dearly held belief, that young people have a right to 'healthy' sexual self-expression, which her response unfairly suppressed.

However, several parents seemed to feel little anxiety about transferring their discomfort into regulating their children. Howard (FG3N), for example, described how with his 12-year-old daughter:

> *'If something comes on that I'm not comfortable watching with her, I go, "You're not watching this" and change channels or something like that.'*

Parents and older siblings also asserted their authority or greater status within the family by teasing children. Thus, Rebecca (N, 10, P) said that:

'When people kiss on TV my mum goes, "Ooh, look, Rebecca, they're kissing!" [. . .] *as a joke.'*

Sometimes such teasing provoked considerable resentment or indignation from interviewees, who claimed that their embarrassment was engineered by others. Seth (N, 12, P) recounted how his mother would tease him precisely because '*She enjoys making me shy*.' Such teasing not only creates an unwelcome visibility for the recipient, but also implies that their response to sexual material might be somehow problematic.

However, parental embarrassment – or, more accurately, representing parents as embarrassed - enabled some young people to demonstrate their own greater sophistication. Seamus (N, 14), for instance, described in his diary:

'One particular moment [in Footballers' Wives] *where Jason Turner had sex on the snooker table with another footballer's mum, which doesn't affect me but for some reason my parents.'*

Likewise, Melanie (N, 10) presented herself as more able to cope with such material than her parents:

'They keep being stupid about things like that. I'm like, "Mum and dad, it's not that rude. I mean, get a grip, it's not that rude!"'

Some young people, however, did describe their own embarrassment, claiming that it was inherent to the situation of watching with parents. They often had to remove themselves from the situation, so they recounted covering their eyes, hiding behind cushions, leaving the room on the pretext of getting a drink, and so on. Some felt their needs for such information (and hence their right to access potentially 'embarrassing' material) were recognised. As Kim (N, 12, P) said:

'My mum thinks that I can watch a bit of things like that, 'cause it's kind of like growing up and that, and she knows it's important that I know what's what.'

However, others argued that their parents' embarrassment reflected their unwillingness to allow them to grow up or to recognise their maturity.

Many claimed that they posed as more ignorant of sexual issues than they actually were, in order to protect their parents. For example, Ceri (N, 17, P) remarked:

'Some of the things that you'd laugh at, your parents go, "Why do you know about that?" [. . .] *I would rather leave them with a nice little mental image of me being 12, if that is what they want.'*

Conversely, children's active display of choosing potentially embarrassing media can constitute a 'coming out' to one's parents as sexual. Thus, Chloe (N, 17, P) described her mother's shock when she first bought a teenage girls' magazine at the age of 10:

'She just didn't realise that I wanted to read more about stuff like that, rather than comics like the Beano and stuff.'

If embarrassment defines age boundaries and identities, it also helps construct gendered roles. Rebecca (N, 10, P) commented that she was more embarrassed with her father:

'Because he's, like, the only man in our house and I prefer talking to women about these kinds of things.'

One consequence of this was that young people developed definite ideas about which programmes they would watch with which parents and which they would watch in their own rooms if they had a television there. While it was generally agreed that the main living room contained the best quality television, and many young people sought out the pleasures of watching with others, at other times it was not worth the embarrassment of doing so. On many occasions, such decisions would have to be made during a programme, where children would disappear upstairs to continue watching in peace. Some parents seemed to operate a 'Don't ask, don't tell' policy on this, where they knew what was happening, but preferred not to challenge it.

Education

Rather than simply forbidding potentially embarrassing material, some parents (particularly mothers) tried to use it as an occasion for debate and discussion with their children. This was particularly the case with soap opera. Several parents saw the current storylines about teenage pregnancy on *Coronation Street* and *EastEnders* as containing clear messages or warnings, and praised them for their refusal to glamorise the issue. However, parents did not necessarily agree with the messages in soap operas and were quick to point to gaps in their coverage of issues. For example, some were particularly critical of the failure to give enough attention to the man's responsibility in relation to sexual issues or pregnancy. By contrast, Jan (FG3N) praised a storyline in *Hollyoaks* about a male character with a sexually transmitted infection because it challenged the idea that '*it's normally the women who are slags*.'

Nevertheless, the exact nature of the 'message' was often seen as irrelevant: most parents felt confident that they could make use of or combat the 'messages' they identified in such programmes. For instance, Latisha (FG9S) described how she found homosexuality '*revolting*' and would encourage her whole family to express disgust if a storyline concerning it appeared in a soap. Yet she simultaneously acknowledged that the producers had a '*right*' to show '*that these things are part of society, even if I don't agree with them*'.

Sometimes parents relied on their children not understanding or asking about storylines, particularly where they were difficult to explain – such as a rape in *Coronation Street* or prostitution in *EastEnders*. As one commented:

'Well, I felt I had to answer [his questions] *because I allowed him to watch it. I mean if I was concerned about it I should have turned the TV off - but some of the things do go over his head.'*

Many also admitted that such talk around issues during viewing fell short of their hopes:

> *'I can remember saying, you know, "You don't want to be getting yourself* [pregnant]. *You want to be going out, having a good time, looking forward to your life. That all comes later on."* [Imitating her daughter] *"Yeah, yeah, yeah."* [Laughter] *But you just hope it goes in.'*
> (Harriet, FG5S)

Parents also acknowledged that an approach that worked in the context of soap opera worked less successfully with some programmes outside family viewing time. For instance, some parents objected to programmes such as *Club Reps* or *Ibiza Uncovered* - although they also acknowledged that older teenage children would dismiss them as '*old fashioned*' for doing so.

In many instances, mothers and fathers adopted rather different positions with respect to sexual content in the media, although this was not straightforward. Some fathers appeared to take a more liberal approach – at least partly on the grounds that this would allow them to continue watching what they wanted – while others were accused of being 'too protective' and less willing to discuss such matters. In general, mothers were more likely to raise questions of ethics and personal conduct. Ethan's remark that '*with my dad it's all about football*' (N, 12, P) was typical. Moreover, many boys perceived such concerns as feminine. Phil (N, 12, P) commented:

> *'My mum,* ***like all mums****, they don't like some stuff that the kids watch, but my dad wasn't that bothered.' (our emphasis)*

Some boys also defined themselves in opposition to their mothers' endeavours, sometimes with the active collusion of their fathers. For instance, Phil (N, 12, P) claimed that, when he ran up a large phone bill while looking for porn on the internet, his father condoned his interest and simply told him off for getting caught. Mothers were frequently depicted by the children as ineffectually commenting on their media choices, but having little power to do anything about them.

Learning gender roles

Family viewing is also a place where children learn gender-appropriate styles of media consumption and displays of desire. Parental and sibling responses to media texts help acculturate children into particular styles of femininity and masculinity. For instance, Reena (N, 14, P) described how her brother would '*act stupid*' when sexual scenes came on television, and her friend Chantel agreed that girls would be more likely to talk sensibly about such matters than boys.

Meanwhile, many interviewees related family jokes about their parents 'fancying' celebrities. Caitlin (N, 12, P), for instance, commented on how her mother liked Mel Gibson in *What Women Want*:

> *'She was getting really excited at that bit* [a shower scene]. *She was sort of like shaking!'*

However, fathers appeared to have more rights to assert forms of sexual desire within the home, for instance in relation to pin-up images. Meanwhile, as we have seen, some fathers expressed anxieties about their sons 'turning gay'. Indeed, Louis identified this as a main reason why he would regulate his four sons' viewing:

> *'The root of it is I don't want my kids or my sons to be homosexual.'*

In most cases, heterosexuality was simply assumed and bolstered. For Ross, what he construed as his young son's early expression of heterosexual desire was a cause of pride and reassurance, rather than the mortification Julie-Anne described above:

> *'He used to come in here and watch pretty girls on the telly, didn't he? . . . I can't remember what advert, he'd be right up the telly* [mimes tongue hanging out]. *Yeah, real pretty girl on. And then, you know, he'd notice that he . . . that he likes pretty girls and then he'd go, "My thing keeps standing up." I said, "Oh, don't worry about it."' (FG7S)*

However, not all parents shared such views. One group of male carers whom we interviewed remarked acerbically that any men who were anxious about gay representations on television clearly '*had some issues about their own sexuality*' (FG10S). Similarly, a group of lesbian mothers discussed how varied their children's gender performances could be, when not constrained by parental anxieties. One parent of a two-year-old boy gave this account of his response to *Shrek*:

> *'He loved the princess. He* ***was*** *the princess! He wants to lie down and be the princess, and I have to wake him up and we have to have a kiss of true love* (. . .) *for a while he really wanted to be called princess all the time, wherever we were.'*

Clearly, we cannot make assertions about media influence without considering how media are used within the home. Yet practices of family viewing do not consist solely of 'role modelling', if by that is meant a rational process through which children are socialised into gender-appropriate identities. Interviewees' accounts frequently suggest that there are powerful fantasies and unconscious processes at work in family interactions, over which individuals may have little control.

7. Regulation

As we have argued, centralised regulation of media is becoming ever more difficult, both because of the access offered by new technologies and because of the difficulty of identifying consensus on moral or ethical issues. In media consumption, as in many other areas of social life, there is a growing emphasis on individualised values of personal autonomy, self-realisation and free choice. Here we consider how families exercise this apparent freedom and some of the difficulties to which it gives rise.

The case for regulation

Discussions of family uses of television and other media often stress the need for parents to limit their children's viewing and prevent them getting access to particular types of material. However, research has pointed to anomalies between what parents say and what they actually do. In reality, television viewing often becomes a site of struggle, where parents try actively to regulate their children's viewing, but where children also resist and subvert – or claim to subvert – family rules. Nevertheless, parents do exercise some control and children do to some extent accept their right to do so. The parents whom we interviewed certainly rehearsed ideas about 'good parenting', but they also identified some of the difficulties they encountered.

While parents might argue that they regulate violence or swearing because they do not think it should be part of their children's lives at all, such a position is virtually impossible to sustain in relation to sex. Although views differed as to timing, all participants acknowledged that they would have to cope with their children's questions and desire for knowledge about sex and eventually with their active sexuality.

Parental regulation depends, in part, on how parents conceive of the effects of the media and on their broader views about childhood. In our focus groups, some expressed concerns about children's '*loss of innocence*', describing them as '*mini adults*', commenting that '*they seem to grow up too quickly*', and comparing children's knowingness with their own naivety at a comparable age. (The conventionality of such perspectives was brought home by the fact that they were echoed by several of the older teenagers.) In some cases, television figured in parental explanations as a foreign element or invasive force, with the power to defile a natural authenticity of childhood. It was depicted through violent metaphors – as '*garbage*' '*forced*' or '*shoved down our throats*', for example.

However, for some, children's awareness was a source of pride. Many parents were actively critical of their own parents for withholding sexual information from them and felt they were not repeating these mistakes with their own children. In welcoming greater openness, they allied themselves with the forces of progress in society. Moreover, some mothers were able to recall their own memories of dressing up and dancing as pop stars, which they claimed had been fundamentally innocent. They thus challenged the notion that such activities in their own children were necessarily precocious or overly eroticised.

Nevertheless, many expressed a general sense of the media pressurising their children to behave in certain ways – although they also recognised that this could be a function of 'peer pressure'. Relatively few objected to the ideological content of programmes – although Sylvia (FG8S) recalled earlier feminist politics and objected to what she saw as offensively sexist language in the children's show *SM:TV Live*. For most, the central focus was on the morality of personal conduct. Jan (FG3N), for example, expressed her concerns about adulterous affairs in the soap operas:

> *'I sometimes wonder . . . if kids just think, "But it happens all the time, it's part of everyday life, so maybe it's not so wrong," you know.'*

As we have seen, there was little evidence in our research that children did, in fact, respond in this way. Nevertheless, this view of children as particularly vulnerable is often invoked in justifying the need for regulation.

Supplementing regulation

All the parents we interviewed were familiar with external forms of media regulation such as the Watershed or video classifications. However, they challenged their adequacy on a number of grounds. Some argued on the basis of practicalities, pointing out, for instance, that in larger families it was often very difficult to prevent younger children seeing material that their older siblings had a right to watch. In some cases, siblings shared bedrooms with televisions and, in others, older children connived with the younger ones in allowing them to watch such material. Parents also admitted that they were vulnerable to children's various tactics of persuasion.

Meanwhile, some parents challenged the logic - more than the principle - of the regulatory systems themselves. For instance, the Watershed was often seen to reflect anachronistic assumptions about domestic routines (such as that children are in bed by nine o'clock). Many remarked that it was inconsistent, untrustworthy or pointless: that it should be set earlier, or should be later, that its boundaries were being pushed by advertisers or by producers. Many parents had concerns about video classifications, often being unable to understand the logic of some decisions (e.g. around *Spider-Man, Jurassic Park* or *Harry Potter*) and engaging in sophisticated debates about how they might have been reached. Most agreed that by the time their children were aged 12 to 14, it was much harder to simply forbid them from seeing material.

Such criticisms should not be taken as a demand to drop regulation, however. Indeed, all the parents claimed to supplement external regulation themselves. In many cases, they focused on quantity, rather than quality – invoking the dangers of eye strain through watching '*too much telly*', or not wanting children to be tired for school the next day, for example. Many acknowledged that in large families they got '*more slack*' with the younger children. Nonetheless, parents would regulate content in many ways: by reading television and film guides, consulting teletext, previewing films or reading magazines, talking to other parents and friends before allowing cinema trips, making on-the-spot decisions to send their children out of the room or to switch over, sometimes even editing films and music themselves before passing them on.

They frequently did this in the name of maintaining their personal values against those of a broader society conceived as inhospitable to them. However, they also argued that their own children were more mature than the regulations permitted or that only they knew their particular needs and vulnerabilities. Josie and Paul, a couple who fostered sexually abused children, provided particularly dramatic examples of the need for such individual understanding when they described how, for such children, a perfectly innocuous scene – *'a Mummy and Daddy kissing, or a Daddy kissing a little girl good night*' – could trigger days of '*horrendous behaviour*.' (FG5N) Their experience served as a reminder both of the need for sensitivity, but also of the impossibility of making the media completely 'safe' for children. Ultimately, parents reserved the right to make their own decisions about such issues and they treated regulatory systems as a guide, rather than as gospel.

Pedagogical parenting

Relatively few parents represented their regulation of children's access to media as an act of prohibition. Many advocated a '*pedagogical*' approach to parenting: that is, they preferred to enhance children's reflective capacities through debate and discussion, rather than insisting – in a more hierarchical way – on parental rights to impose moral values. For instance, Sandra (FG3N) described discussing our *Grange Hill* storyline with her daughter:

> *'I think I made a conscious effort to try and discuss with her because I didn't have the opportunity as a child to discuss things with my parents. Whenever she asked questions about sex, I always tried to answer them in a way that I thought she'd be able to understand at whatever age she was . . . and that issue wouldn't have been raised in the house unless we'd seen it on television.'*

As we have seen, this argument applied particularly to soap operas, which were praised for putting a '*moral angle*', and for '*answer*[ing] *a lot of questions for a lot of young people that parents wouldn't normally approach with them*.' (Imogen, FG3N).

Apart from some who claimed strong religious faith, participants generally did not see their lives in terms of certainties and moral conformity. Instead they emphasised the importance of their children being able to make happy, healthy choices, to be their own people, to seek their own satisfactions, and recognised that their choices might be different from their own. This was particularly apparent in some of the parents' debates about lesbian and gay sexuality. As we have noted, surveys have detected a general cultural shift towards greater tolerance here. In our groups there were some strong expressions of homophobia from some fathers, but for many parents (particularly heterosexual mothers), sexuality became a kind of 'litmus test' of how they were doing things better than their own parents. Hazel (FG1S), for instance, claimed to value fictional representations for helping her explain things to her children and illustrated this by describing family discussions about a lesbian storyline in *EastEnders*. These responses are quite striking considering that until relatively recently, parents were encouraged to feel guilt if their children were gay and to scrutinise their potential role in 'turning' them that way. Mothers here emphasised the importance – for both themselves and their children - of being '*honest*' about and accepting of this identity. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the sheer hard work that this 'pedagogical' style

of parenting involves. For parents who objected to sexual content, each encounter with the media was fraught with risks, requiring research in advance or decisions on the spot about when they might have to turn the sound down, turn off, turn over, encourage their children off the sofa, out of the room, to bed. They were also acutely aware of how they might be judged by others, sometimes refusing to allow children to watch videos with friends only for fear of how other parents might react. If parents are accountable for their children to such an extent, they also bear a greater burden of responsibility for what they perceive as their failures.

Children's views

Children strongly rejected the view that they were particularly vulnerable to media influence. Many argued that parents were 'out of touch' and unaware of how much they knew: as Krystal (S, 14, D) put it:

> *'Parents would* ***die*** *if they knew half the things kids talk about!'*

They also emphasised the gulf between the older generation and theirs. Neville (N, 14, P) argued that today: '*You get more freedom . . . 'cause they used to not get any freedom at all*.' Parents were also held to be incompetent in relation to media, lacking understanding of new technology and even the basic media literacy necessary to follow plots.

The argument that parents were '*over-protective*' enabled older interviewees, in particular, to recognise their parents' concerns as touchingly benevolent, even if misplaced. As Jon (N, 17, P) remarked of his father:

> *'I think he's just laying rules as all good parents do. They've gotta set standards and they expect you to abide by them.'*

As we have seen, some went on to turn the tables, arguing that in fact it was they who had to protect their parents from their actual levels of knowledge and sophistication. Others were more forthrightly dismissive and impatient, such as Alicia (N, 10, P):

> *'Mums and dads, they're like eighties kind of thing. Oh, God! They think it's all rude and they think I shouldn't be knowing about this until I'm about 13 or 14 or something like that. They wanna keep me a child forever!'*

While media representations were generally held to be acceptable or harmless for them personally, they were evaluated in terms of 'others' for whom they might be dangerous or beneficial. However, children were sometimes hazy about what the feared 'effects' of seeing sex on television might be, proffering vague explanations such as that it would '*fill our minds with dirty stuff*' (Theo, S 12, P). They were familiar with the notion of '*copying what you see*', but this applied less easily to sex than it might do to violence, for example (especially for those to whom the very idea of sex was anathema). Ultimately, these perceptions amounted to little more than common sense wisdom: children found it hard to identify specific examples of such effects, and they were invariably displaced onto unspecified children younger than themselves.

All our participants knew the classification categories for videos and most knew how the Watershed functioned, although - like the parents - they were generally hostile to external regulation. As we have seen, people who actively complained about the media were dismissed as '*opinionated middle-aged women*'. The children were quick to point to what they saw as anomalies in classifications, particularly in relation to computer games. Unlike parents, however, they referred not just to classifications that seemed too low, but to the false expectations a higher classification could create. As Chantel (N, 14, G) remarked of *The Full Monty's* classification, in a distinctly disappointed tone, '*You think you're gonna see the full monty!*'

The older children asserted that they were old enough to watch such material, pointing out that at 16 they could engage in heterosexual sex and so should be allowed to see it. Some drew parallels between their active decision-making in other areas of their lives and their rights to do so in relation to the media. Neville (N, 14, P) pointed out that young people were being invited to take responsible decisions about their lives at relatively early ages – for example, when selecting subjects to study at school. Media regulation could seem anomalous where they were being encouraged to see themselves as active meaning-makers and decision-takers elsewhere.

Nevertheless, regulation helped to mark out material that was desirable or where they would expect to find more graphic material. For instance, Dale (S, 14, P) remarked of Sky's *Dream Team* that:

> *'It's on about eight o'clock so you don't see that much.'*

If they did encounter sexual material later in the evening, they were aware that it was '*for adults*' and that they were encroaching on their territory. Such knowledge of conventions came to seem self-evident, which fed into their lack of sympathy for people who complained. As Tom (N, 17, G) remarked of *So Graham Norton*:

> *'If you tune in at that time in the evening and watch that kind of programme, I think you know what you're getting.'*

As this implies, regulation gives children a norm against which to calibrate their own developmental levels – albeit mostly discovering that they are in advance of the stages that seem to be set out for them. Bea (N 10, P), for example, described how she bought girls' magazines because she was '*fast at growing up*'. Growing up, in her account, is not something that happens to her, but something which she can achieve – and her media consumption is a measure of her speed and success in doing so.

Children were also able to rehearse for adulthood by practising censorship on younger siblings. Thus, Will (S, 10, P) argued that, although children of his age needed to know about '*such things*' at quite a young age, the down side was that younger children (below seven) might get to see them. He solemnly reported that his five-year-old sister hadn't seen *'it'* (that is, sexual material) but had got '*very close to seeing it*'. Fortunately, he reassured us, '*I always manage to get the control off her*.' For Will, seeing material over his age was a mark of adulthood; however, so, too, was regulating material on behalf of even younger viewers.

In general, however, the children upheld parents' rights to regulate their viewing. As Noelle (S, 12, P) remarked:

> *'I think my mum should tell me if she thinks it is* [suitable] *because she's been my age and she's been older and she knows what's better for me.'*

Children were careful to explain any laxity in a positive light, arguing that they themselves were exceptionally mature, that their parents trusted them, and so on. They were also aware that not regulating television would be viewed negatively by others. Clint (S, 10, P) explained that his mother didn't like him watching sexual material because '*she just thinks you're gonna go round at school like and talk about it and everything*', which would mean, Leo added, that '*your mum and dad aren't very nice people*'.

On the other hand, they also described various strategies they had evolved for evading parental scrutiny. They would disguise what a text was really about e.g. by hiding cases that showed classifications; they would watch with older siblings or at friends' houses, and they would capitalise on differences between their parents to persuade one to let them watch what the other would not. They would watch disapproved material from behind settees, on staircases or upstairs on another television, swiftly changing channels when they heard their parents approaching.

The children were, overall, keen to present themselves as self-regulating. In the case of sexual material, many younger children, in particular, often chose actively not to watch it and were very definite about not wanting to see what they referred to as '*full frontal views*' or nudity.
The children had very definite ideas about what they '*needed to know*' and employed a range of strategies for coping with material they thought was '*too much*'. Occasionally young people proved to be sterner censors than their parents. Krystal (S, 14, P) described watching Tom Cruise in *Magnolia*:

> *'I turned it over and my mum says, "Why are you turning it over for?" and I said, "Well, 'cause it's not suitable for me," and she says, "But I want to watch it!" and I said, "Well, I'll go to bed."'*

Conclusion

All the parents whom we interviewed, and who were described to us, were concerned to regulate or to mediate their children's viewing of sexual material. Few parents represented their regulation of children's media use as a purely prohibitive act - most were inclined to adopt a more democratic or 'pedagogical' approach, placing an emphasis on choice and self-reflection. Similar perspectives were also apparent in children's own accounts of how they managed their media use.

Yet if parents and children have gained in autonomy, they also take on responsibility. For parents, there is a definite price to pay for this, not least in the unending nurturing and surveillance that is required of them. This approach also depends upon the construction of 'bad parents' who fail to maintain the correct standards of involvement in their children's viewing or of self-control in relation to their own media consumption. Whether or not such parents exist, the fear of being seen as one of them acts as a powerful cause of guilt and shame: in this area, as in so many others, parents may be left feeling that they can never be 'good enough'.

8. Conclusions

By way of conclusion, we would like to offer a very brief summary of what we see as the key findings of the qualitative research.

1. **Whether or not they choose to do so, children frequently encounter sexual material in the media.**
   None of the children in our sample found any difficulty in identifying media material that was relevant to our theme of 'love, sex and relationships'. As we have seen, there is some disagreement among researchers about whether the amount of sexual content in the media is increasing; although the majority of people seem to believe that it is – including the 16 and 17-year-olds in our research, looking back on their '*younger days*' a mere five or six years previously. The children in our study were encountering such material not just in 'adult' television programming, but also in children's programmes, movies, advertising, pop music, magazines and newspapers, and on the internet. However, relatively little of this material contained 'explicit' representations of sexual activity and much of the sexual content was in the form of verbal references.

2. **The material children do encounter is quite diverse in terms of the 'messages' it is seen to contain.**
   The children sometimes found it difficult to identify the 'messages' about sex and relationships that were contained in this material, and the messages they did identify were by no means uniform or always straightforward. In some instances, sex was clearly perceived as an enjoyable and desirable activity for young people, but the children also identified many instances where the media appeared to be informing them about the dangers and problems it represented, particularly at a young age. They certainly did not perceive the media to be encouraging them to have sex prematurely or to be promoting a purely 'recreational' approach to sex; in many instances, the predominant tone appeared to be one of moral warning. The modern media offer **mixed** messages and often explicitly require consumers to make up their own minds about sexual issues.

3. **Children value the media as a source of information relative to other sources, such as parents or the school.**
   The children were generally very critical of the sex education they received in school, arguing that it was too narrowly focused and too moralistic in its approach. Many also found it embarrassing to be taught about such matters by their parents. By contrast, they preferred media such as teenage magazines and soap operas on the grounds that they were often more informative, less embarrassing to use and more attuned to their needs and concerns – and, in some respects, more morally neutral. In practice, the children often combined different sources of information and used the media as a pretext for discussion with peers or parents. However, the easy availability of such information does not mean that learning about sex has somehow become scientific and rational. On the contrary, it is still surrounded by shame, embarrassment and ambivalence, in which romantic aspirations co-exist with knowledge of sordid realities.

4. **Nevertheless, children do not necessarily trust what they find in the media: they are 'literate' and often highly critical consumers.**
   Children are not the naive or incompetent consumers they are frequently assumed to be. They use a range of critical skills and perspectives when interpreting sexual content, and this develops both with age and with their experience of media. Some of these are quite generalised and relatively superficial – as in the criticisms of how sex is used in advertising or to sell newspapers. However, the children's responses to sexual imagery in advertising or music videos displayed a well-developed understanding of how such images are constructed and manipulated. Likewise, their judgements of sexual storylines in soap operas and dramas showed a complex awareness of the conventions of narrative and characterisation. In a range of media genres, the children were making sophisticated, multi-faceted judgements about the relationships between fiction and reality. They were also able to make thoughtful contributions to debates about media ethics and regulation, although (perhaps surprisingly) there was little sustained critique of sexism in the media.

5. **Children (and parents) are aware of media regulation, but reserve the right to make their own judgements.**
   All the children and parents in our research were aware of regulatory systems such as the Watershed and film classification and used these as one source of information when deciding what to watch. In general, they agreed that such guidance was necessary – albeit primarily to protect audiences (such as younger children) whom they deemed to be more vulnerable than themselves. This was felt to be particularly important in relation to material that would be seen in more public settings, such as on advertising hoardings or on television before the Watershed. In some instances, children positively rejected material which they decided was '*too old*' for them. However, they often resisted or rejected parents' attempts to decide on their behalf, on the grounds that they were old-fashioned or patronising. Most parents were inclined to avoid an authoritarian approach and preferred to negotiate with their children over what they should see although, in some instances, this seemed to make their job more difficult, rather than easier. Perhaps particularly in relation to sexual material, both parents and children seek to define themselves as self-regulating, autonomous audiences.

6. **Children do learn about sex and relationships from the media, but this is not a straightforward or reliable process.**
   The children often rejected overt attempts on the part of the media to teach them about sexual matters and they were sceptical about some of the advice they were offered (for example, in problem pages or talk shows). They were particularly resistant to the use of drama to convey pre-defined moral messages. They seemed to engage more effectively with texts where they were encouraged to debate issues and make up their own minds. For parents, too, more 'open' texts such as soap operas provided useful opportunities for them to promote their own moral frameworks. Both children and parents wanted to be addressed as individuals who were capable of making their own choices, rather than as the recipients of moral instruction, and it may be that this is more apparent when it comes to sexual material than to other forms of media representation (such as 'violence').

7. **Younger children do not necessarily always understand sexual references or connotations.**
   Despite the children's claims, they did not necessarily know '*everything*' about sex: they were far from being the precocious sexual sophisticates imagined by some adult critics. Younger children's partial knowledge means that they often ignore or misinterpret many references to sexual matters, particularly where these are in the form of comic innuendo or 'suggestion' (as in the case of music videos). Younger children are also less aware of the cultural conventions through which sex is **signified** in the media: what older children might perceive as sexual, younger children may perceive as merely '*rude*'. To this extent, the media have only a limited power to impose sexual meanings: in order to be meaningful in the first place, they must fit into a framework of existing knowledge – and this knowledge is acquired gradually, from a range of sources, not just from the media.

8. **Morality is a key concern in children's interpretations of, and debates about, the media.**
   The children made judgements about sex, not in the abstract, but in the context of 'love and relationships'. They were very concerned about the decency or propriety of sexual behaviour or sexual images, particularly in public settings. They debated at length the motivations that led characters to engage in sex and the consequences of their behaviour for others, and they were often critical of forms of sexual behaviour that they perceived as excessive or '*perverted*'. Their moral position was often premised on ideas about the importance of self-fulfilment; however, there was also a strong emphasis on the need for trust, fidelity and mutual respect. Here again, there was very little evidence that the children were being morally corrupted or led towards a kind of amoral cynicism by the media. Indeed, they often appeared more 'moralistic' (and in some instances, more 'prudish') than many adults.

9. **There were some striking differences between boys and girls – at least in how gender was 'performed' in relation to the media.**
   The children themselves perceived there to be considerable differences in boys' and girls' perspectives on these issues. Their views constituted a kind of common sense wisdom, according to which (for example) girls were inherently more open or emotional than boys – although our research provided only partial support for these ideas. We found that girls were more ready to express sexual desire in relation to media images than boys (e.g. in relation to pin-ups), for whom such responses may have seemed 'politically incorrect'. Boys' responses to media images of men were often characterised by a form of insecurity or 'homosexual panic', which was sometimes reinforced by directly homophobic strategies on the part of parents. Particularly for boys, the public visibility of images of homosexuality seems to problematise or relativise what it means to be heterosexual – although it is questionable whether it leads to greater tolerance of 'perversities'.

10. **The influence of the media depends heavily upon the contexts of use, particularly in the family.**
    The media become meaningful in different ways in different contexts. How children use or read a text in private may be very different from how they speak about it with peers, where there may be considerable pressure not to '*take it too seriously*'. Children use media consumption as an opportunity to rehearse or police gendered identities – as when

boys use pornography to harass girls, or older children use their knowledge of media to display their sexual sophistication. Different styles of parenting – which we have defined as more or less 'pedagogical'– also result in very different responses to sexual material and very different ways of coming to terms with it. Parents can 'model' or reinforce particular responses to sexual material and hence particular sexual identities for their children. The media do not have an autonomous ability either to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them.

Postscript: theory, research and policy

In analysing our data, we frequently speculated about how our findings might or might not have been different had we undertaken the project several years ago. Clearly, there are continuities here with the past; however, there are also important differences. We believe our research points to the emergence of new understandings of the self that some have seen as symptomatic of the neo-liberal 'consumer cultures' that have emerged in industrialised societies over the past couple of decades (Rose 1999). It suggests that young people growing up today are now less dependent for moral guidance on the authority of religion, traditional morality or established experts such as teachers - although to some extent they are still prepared to accept the authority of their parents. They look to the secular guidance offered by the media but, even there, they favour media that appear to allow them to '*make up their own minds*'. Young people today are keen to present themselves as self-regulating individuals in their use of the media, as in other areas of their lives. Likewise, parents increasingly seem to believe that 'good' parenting should involve harnessing the self-regulating capacities of children, rather than imposing norms and standards of behaviour. This suggests a new accommodation or settlement between children and parents, in tune with the less hierarchical approaches that now permeate other areas of social and working life – although we should not underestimate the new burdens this places on parents and, indeed, on children themselves.

The emphasis our interviewees placed on their self-governing capacities may help explain the particular dilemmas of regulating sexual material. Media regulation invites audiences to consider texts in terms of their social acceptability – e.g. as when an age classification on a video implies that it may be inappropriate for younger audiences. However, sex appears more problematic as an issue here than does violence. There is a long-established tradition of research and debate about the 'harm' allegedly caused by so-called violent media. Yet our interviewees – both children and parents – were much less sure of themselves when discussing the possible harmful effects of sexual media and they provided little tangible evidence of such effects. One possible explanation here might be that sexual media material has been increasingly drawn into the domain of personal ethics, as an occasion for individuals to scrutinise their own desires, conduct and responses, rather than that of social harm. For this reason, it may be harder for regulatory bodies to obtain the degree of consensus that is necessary to win legitimacy, at least when it comes to controlling sexual material. To this extent, current moves towards relaxation of these rules - particularly in relation to contexts where such encounters are deliberately chosen rather than imposed, as in the distinction between billboards and magazine advertisements – would seem to be in tune with public views.

However, our research also suggests that there should be an important role for education here – and, in this respect, the emphasis on 'media literacy' in the remit of Ofcom, the new communications regulator, is one that we would see as a very positive development. There is a long and well-established tradition of media education in schools in the United Kingdom and a great deal of expertise here on which Ofcom should be able to build (see Buckingham 2003). Our research also suggests that the media should be a much more central focus for formal sex education classes than currently tends to be the case. However, there are dangers for teachers in setting out to disabuse young people of the 'false' messages we imagine they derive from the media – particularly if we then seek to replace these with the 'true' messages that (we imagine) we alone can provide. In this area, perhaps more than many others, young people are likely to prove resistant to any overtly didactic approach. As with media education, in general, we need to begin by recognising the complexity of young people's media experiences and the extensive media literacy they already possess.

PART TWO
The survey

9. Methodology

In order to complement the qualitative data discussed in Part One of this report, we also carried out a larger quantitative survey in the schools in which we had conducted the main part of the research. The survey was completed by all the students in the year groups from which our interviewees had been selected except the oldest, that is, by students aged 9-10, 11-12 and 13-14 (school years 5, 7 and 9). A total of 778 surveys were returned, out of a maximum possible of 937: a high return rate due to the surveys being completed during class time. Missing surveys were partly due to normal absences through factors such as sickness, but also partly because of school trips for students at the end of the summer term, when the questionnaire was administered. The pool of responses from each of the two older age groups was over 300, whereas the numbers in each primary school were relatively small – approximately 60 students in each, making 119 completed surveys. This limits what conclusions can be drawn from the data on the 10-year-olds. A detailed profile of the respondents can be found in Appendix I.

The aim of the questionnaire was to consolidate our discussions in interviews and ascertain if certain key findings and perceptions were more widely shared. The questions were based on issues that had emerged during the course of our interviews. They covered media access and use in the home (including privatised access in the bedroom), rules about television watching, preferred means for learning about sex, and demographic data (age, gender, family type and composition etc). Some questions, particularly those seeking opinions, differed slightly between the youngest and the two older age groups. The 12 and 14-year-olds were asked to respond to a list of 19 questions on a five point scale (agree strongly/agree/disagree/ disagree strongly/don't know). The 10-year-olds were given a simpler task: they were offered only 10 statements about sexual media and asked to respond according to whether they liked, disliked, thought it was OK to see them or didn't know. See Appendix II for the questions in full. A graphic designer illustrated and typeset the questionnaires to make them look appealing and thus to encourage respondents to undertake completing them seriously. The results were coded and analysed using SPSS.

In this report, we discuss the overall results of the survey – that is, responses to our questions across the whole sample. We also consider differences within the sample, of several kinds. In our analysis, we have systematically compared responses in terms of demographic factors – age, social class, gender, family composition – and with regard to aspects of media use. We have also correlated responses to individual questions where this appeared relevant. In this report, we present only those associations that are statistically significant, according to well-established tests used in survey research. A brief description of the analytical methodology is provided in the postscript.

A number of related surveys have recently been published that complement our own. They include Sonia Livingstone's extensive work on young people and new media (Livingstone and Bovill 1999): Marie Stopes International's survey of parental views on educating their children about sex (Taylor Nelson Sofres plc 2000); AVERT's survey of sex education in secondary schools (Lawrence *et al.* 2000); and the Australian Broadcasting Authority's survey of young children's viewing habits (Sheldon *et al.* 1994). In addition, the

Broadcasting Standards Commission has carried out a number of research projects on similar issues with adults, as discussed in the Introduction to Part One. We refer to these for the purposes of comparison where appropriate.

10. Key findings

Our key findings fall into three main categories, as follows:

1. **Media as a source of sexual learning**
   Young people are often enthusiastic about the media as a source of sexual learning. Over two-thirds agree that they are useful or very useful as a '*way to find out about love, sex and relationships*' and that magazines, in particular, give useful information on these issues. Fifty four per cent agreed that the media '*try to help young people make up their own minds about sex*' and 58% that the media '*try to help young people understand the difference between right and wrong*', with only around a quarter disagreeing. There was less support among young people for the hypothesis that the media encourage young people to have sex too young - only 25% agreed.

   The media are now on a par with mothers as a source of information: 66% stated that mothers are useful or very useful for finding out about sex. In this survey only sex education lessons at school scored more highly: 80% stated that they were useful or very useful – in striking contrast with the more critical views that were voiced in interviews. However, as other surveys have consistently suggested, young people continue to have difficulty talking to fathers about issues related to love, sex and relationships: 34% found their fathers useful, the same rating given to 'posters and advertisements'.

   Young people feel that their parents underestimate their maturity and their existing or potential need for sexual information. Sixty-nine per cent of 12 and 14-year-olds agreed that they know more about sex than their parents think they do. Ninety per cent also disagreed that they were too young to learn about sex.

2. **Contexts of media use, and access to sexual content**
   Despite some trends towards individualised viewing as they grow older, the majority of young people continue to consume media material in the company of others. While it would appear from children's perceptions that parents are not unduly concerned to regulate their children's viewing or to limit their viewing of sexual material on television, 50% of young people stated that parents had talked to them about these issues in relation to something they were watching together on television. Just over half of them (52%) welcomed such discussions. However, in general, 73% of 12 and 14-year-olds state that they don't like to see programmes or videos containing sex when they are with their mothers; 65% feel the same about viewing with their fathers.

   There is ample evidence that children not only can get access to sexual material, but also actively seek it out. Many claim to be able to subvert parental viewing rules. A significant minority of 10-year-olds and a majority of 12-14-year-olds appear positively to enjoy adult-oriented programmes (although these may or may not contain sexual content).

3. **Judgements about sexual content in the media**

   Young people are also able to make judgements about what they do and do not want to watch on television. Of the two-thirds of respondents who had seen a programme or video that had 'too much' about sex in it, 64% had carried on watching, while the remainder (36%) had chosen to stop.

   As they grow older, young people appear to become less inclined to reject or be shocked by particular forms of sexual representation in the media. They are also more likely to hold that there should be more information about lesbian and gay relationships in the media.

   Gender and age are the most significant predictors of attitudes and behaviours in relation to the media that we found in this survey. Despite popular myths, social class does not appear from our survey to be a relevant factor either in respect of young people's opinions or in relation to the degree of parental regulation, although it does impact on children's access to the internet.

11. Discussion

1. Young people's views on the media as a source of learning about love, sex and relationships

Young people are often enthusiastic about the media as a source of learning about love, sex and relationships. Sixty eight per cent of respondents who answered the question, across all age groups, stated that television is useful or very useful as a '*way to find out about love, sex and relationships*'. Boys were more likely to agree than girls on this point (72% compared to 62%). Sixty seven per cent of those children who responded agreed that '*teenage magazines give useful information about relationships and sex*'. Girls were more likely to agree (71%), but 57% of boys nonetheless also agreed. Such endorsement mirrored that given by our interviewees, although in discussions young people tended to express greater scepticism, particularly about the advice they received from the media.

Unsurprisingly, those who are the most avid readers of magazines are also most likely to find them useful (78% of those who read at least one magazine frequently, as compared to 56% of those who read magazines only occasionally). However, it would also seem that those who are not avid readers are unlikely to be reached by other means: non- and occasional readers were relatively unenthusiastic about other media sources of information such as posters, advertisements, books and leaflets, whereas regular magazine readers tended to be more enthusiastic about all of these.

Nonetheless, other media related sources of learning scored well. Sixty one per cent of those who answered thought that books and leaflets were useful, 20% that the radio was and 34% that posters and advertisements were useful. It would appear that the media may be an overlooked resource for both sex educators and parents.

Young people's positive views in this survey contrast strongly with how the media are represented as a source of misinformation and even moral corruption in popular debates about the impact of the media on young audiences. There was little support among young people for the hypothesis that the media encourage young people to have sex too young: 55% disagreed, 19% did not know and only 25% agreed. Moreover, 54% agreed that the media '*try to help young people make up their own minds about sex*' and 58% that the media '*try to help young people understand the difference between right and wrong*', with only around a quarter disagreeing. For them, it seems, the media are an assistance rather than a hindrance in developing their own moral standpoints. The main point on which young people's concerns may be likely to coincide with these popular criticisms is on whether the media '*make young people too concerned about how they look*': 67% agreed that they do and only 19% disagreed. Fourteen-year-olds were more likely to agree with this than 12-year-olds, perhaps suggesting that teenagers experience increasing pressure from the media in this respect.

The media also score well when compared to other sources of information about love, sex and relationships, such as parents. In our survey, mothers get almost equal rating to television: 66% stated that mothers are useful or very useful for finding out about sex.

Younger children appear more likely to go to their mothers when they have questions than older ones do – 73% of 10-year-olds said their mothers were useful compared to 62% of 14-year-olds. Fifty two per cent of boys found their mothers useful compared to 80% of girls, 34% of boys claimed she was *not* useful compared to 15% of girls, 15% of boys did not know but only 6% of girls said the same.

However, as other surveys have consistently suggested, young people continue to have difficulty talking to fathers about issues related to love, sex and relationships: 34% found their fathers useful, a rating on a par with 'posters and advertisements' as a source of information. Fathers did not score well even for boys: 43% found them useful, but 37% found them not useful and 20% did not know (suggesting they had not tried to find out from them). Only 26% of girls found fathers useful, 35% did not know and 39% also found them not useful.

Those who said their mothers were useful were more likely also to say that their father was useful, and vice versa, which might imply that some parents act as a 'team' when talking to their children about love, sex and relationships. Mothers may get a higher rating in the usefulness scales partly because they are more available, although children might also find them easier to talk to. In some cases, of course, parents are not living together so the mother may be the one who is more likely to talk about these things. However, these findings suggest that some children are missing out altogether on getting useful advice from either parent.

Friends continue to be an important source of learning (the principle on which peer education is based): just over half of children who responded to the question found older or same age friends useful.

All respondents were able to identify several potential sources of sexual information, including grandparents, step-parents, siblings, friends and books, suggesting that young people are learning about sex from a range of sources, even if they are more enthusiastic about some than others.

Respondents were positive about sex education lessons at school: 80% of those who answered stated that they were useful or very useful. This is surprising if contrasted with our qualitative data, in which interviewees were consistently critical of the narrow focus and negative approach of school sex education. These findings might suggest that schools perform more of a service in this respect than young people are willing to admit in the context of interviews, or perhaps respondents to the survey focused on the usefulness of the factual information schools provide rather than the more general issues of values and perspective that our interviewees raised.

Moreover, dedicated magazine readers were more likely to agree that sex education should start sooner - perhaps they read the magazines because they are looking for information on precisely this topic. They were also marginally more likely to agree that they knew more about sex than their parents realised (79% in this category compared to around two-thirds in the other categories).

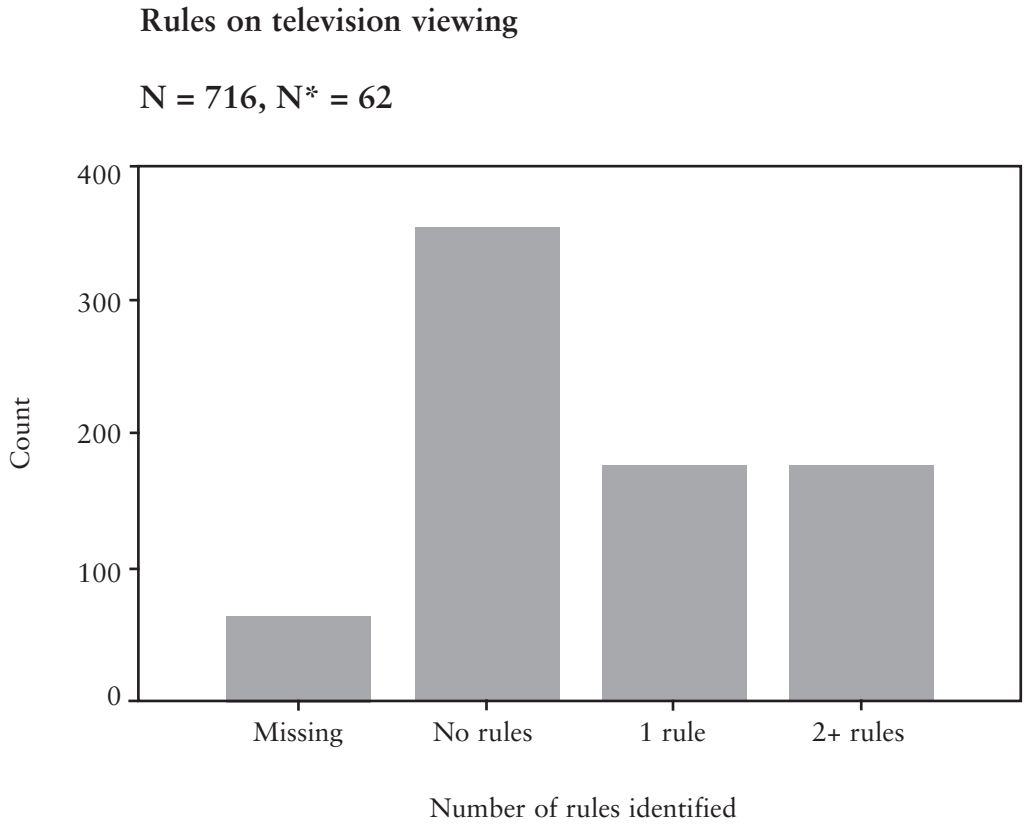
2. The contexts of consumption

Despite some trends towards individualised viewing as they grow older, young people continue to consume media material in the company of others. Although 89% of children claimed that they had a television in their bedrooms, 68% of children watch television '*in the main room where everyone often sits*' and 60% stated that when they watched television it was mostly with others. Thus, although we did not ask directly whether they preferred to watch on their own or with others, it would seem that many children do opt for collective viewing, even when they have alternatives available to them. Of course, this may be because they prefer the better quality facilities that are normally located more centrally in the home. The percentage watching television in their bedroom is however higher for the 14-year-olds – over a third claimed to mostly watch in their bedrooms, twice as high a percentage as the 10-year-olds, and almost half to watch mainly on their own, compared to 13% of 10-year-olds. Girls are more likely to view television in their bedrooms: 34% of females but only 24% of males said they watched television in their bedrooms.

It would appear that many parents lay down some rules about what is appropriate for their children to watch, and how: half of our respondents could identify at least one rule from a list of 'dos and don'ts' about television viewing that applied to them, for example. Commonly recognised rules included '*I have to finish my homework or special jobs first*', ticked by 20% of children, switching off the television by a specific time and not being allowed to watch some programmes. Family position appears to make some difference to parental regulation. Oldest children in the family (who are, of course, not always the *older* children in our survey) are subject to more rules than younger or only children – corresponding to parents' own accounts in discussions of how hard it was to maintain rules as they had more children.

By the same token, conversely, half of children reported parental leniency. This was particularly true of the 14-year-olds: 56% of them, compared to 5% of 10-year-olds and 40% of 12-year-olds claimed that there were no restrictions on their viewing. (Comparatively, the Australian Broadcasting Authority's 1994 survey found that nearly all children aged 5-12 could identify rules about watching television in the home.) Of course, this relies on self-reporting, in which young people may have preferred to present themselves as people who could '*watch anything they liked*'. Additionally, it may be that children are oblivious to rules that do exist because they are part of the home culture and how the family operates, rather than explicitly laid down. It is worth noting in this respect that some of those who claimed they could watch whatever they liked on television went on to indicate that they did have rules (that they could not watch 15 or 18 certificate videos, for instance).

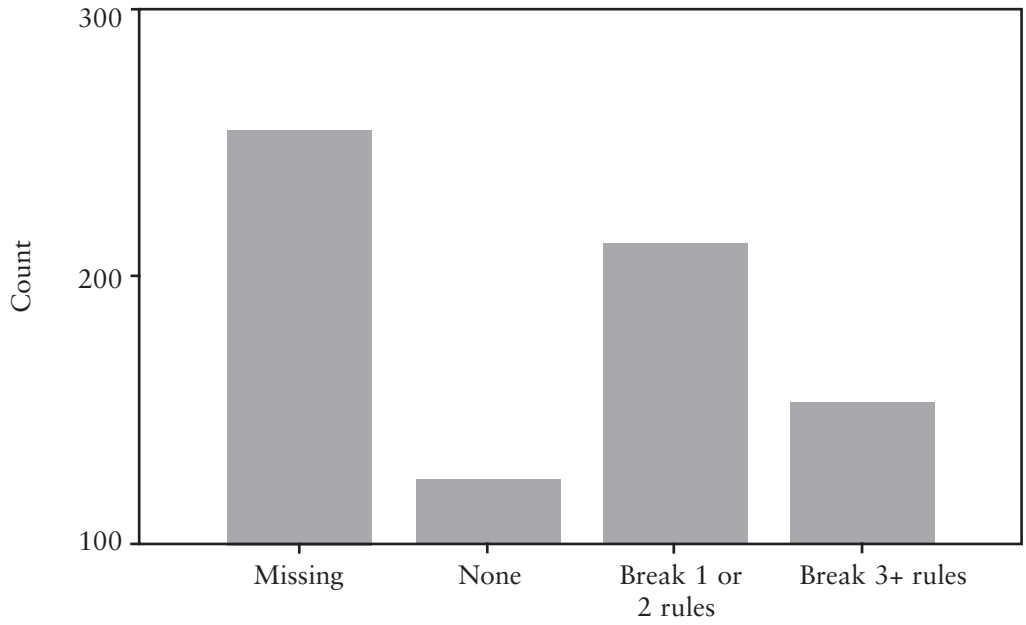
However, these findings do contrast with the picture parents painted in focus groups, where they presented themselves as concerned and monitoring, and it does suggest that the extent to which parents are able to exert control over their children fades rapidly as they enter their teenage years, or even earlier.



Moreover, even where rules exist, it seems that children can get round them. Seventy five per cent of children who answered the question could give at least one way in which they could get round general parental 'dos and don'ts' about what they were allowed to watch on television or on video. The most popular tactic, identified by 32% of children, was simply persuading parents. However, they could also exploit differences between fathers and mothers: 20% of children agreed that their fathers would sometimes let them watch something their mother did not want them to, while 12% said that their mothers would let them watch what their fathers did not want them to – which might suggest that fathers are easier to persuade, or that they are less likely to object to specific material in any case. Others opted to watch on another television (16%), watch at a friend's house (21%) or watch secretly (17%).

Breaking rules on television viewing

N = 509, N* = 269



Of those children who have internet access at home, 56% claimed that their parent(s) never watched what they were doing when they were on the internet. Thirty seven per cent said that their parents '*sometimes*' did, and small numbers (6%) that they '*mostly*' or '*always*' did. This might be surprising given the frequent scare stories about the internet – although it is also understandable in the context of family life and the practicalities of media usage. However, a breakdown by age suggests that parents are more likely to watch younger children: only 31% of 10-year-olds said their parents 'never' watched what they were doing, 58% said they '*sometimes*' did and 11% that they mostly or always did, whereas by the age of 14, 70% of children could claim that their parents never watched them. Among those young people who did not have internet access at home (and, therefore, may only have used it in the more heavily regulated context of school), 42% nonetheless felt able to agree that it was '*hard to avoid stuff about sex on the internet*', compared to 50% who did use the internet at home. (This suggests that the view of the internet as being awash with pornography may be related as much to popular conceptions as to actual experience.)

There is also evidence that relatively few parents attempt to exercise some control over media material that contains '*too much about sex*': a minority, 43% of children, stated that their parents or carers had tried to stop them watching television programmes or videos on these grounds. Perhaps this suggests that parents are not, in practice, unduly concerned about sexual material. The Australian Broadcasting Authority's research showed that parents were more likely to regulate children's access to programmes containing violence than other programme types, for instance (Sheldon *et al.* 1994).

Among those who could recall parents stopping them watching sexual material, popular parental strategies appeared to be to change channel or to tell their children to look away. Twenty per cent recalled the former, 12% the latter, although 15% were allowed to carry on watching once the scene had finished. More hierarchical approaches such as sending children out of the room appeared to be unpopular – only 5% stated that they had had this experience and only 4% that the television had been turned off. Our interviews with parents would seem to confirm that such authoritarian tactics are frowned on even among parents.

Those children who claimed there were no rules about television viewing were also more likely to claim that their parents had never talked to them about sex because of something they had watched with them, whereas among those who could identify at least one rule it seemed that parents were more likely to have talked about sex with them. This would suggest that some parents are simply more 'interventionist' – both negatively (in the sense of banning particular programmes) and positively (in the sense of mediating and discussing) – than others. However, as we shall see below, these different styles of parenting did not correlate with different social class groups, as is sometimes believed to be the case: middle-class parents were not more or less interventionist in this respect than working-class parents.

It would seem that the television can provide a focus for discussions about love, sex or relationships because of material that is viewed together. Fifty per cent of young people stated that parents had talked to them about these issues in relation to something they were watching together on television. Just over half of them (52%) welcomed such discussions.

On the other hand, however, it would seem that collective viewing of sexual media is often a source of embarrassment or discomfort: 73% of 12 and 14-year-olds state that they did not like to see programmes or videos with sex in when they are with their mothers; 65% felt the same about viewing with their fathers. It may be that this embarrassment is part of what makes young people choose to watch on their own as they grow into their teenage years, or to turn to alternative, more private sources of information such as magazines.

There is ample evidence that children not only can get access to sexual material, but also actively seek it out. Significant minorities appeared positively to enjoy adult-oriented programmes (although, of course, these do not necessarily include sexual content). Twenty five per cent of 10-year-olds stated that they '*liked*' to see or hear television programmes or videos made for adults; 32% liked those that show '*adults having problems in their love life*'. Sixty five per cent of 12 and 14-year-olds agreed that they like to watch television programmes that are made for adults. Interestingly, however, relatively few (31%) liked – or were prepared to admit to liking – reading about '*the sex lives of famous people*'.

Whatever their views on adult programming, there is more general agreement among young people that their parents – and adult culture in general - underestimate their maturity and their existing or potential need for sexual information. Sixty nine per cent of 12 and 14-year-olds agreed that they know more about sex than their parents think they do. Ninety per cent also disagreed that they were too young to learn about sex. However, 54% nonetheless think that sex education should start sooner than it does – indicating that despite their claims to have knowledge, they are keen for yet more. It may well be that the

media meet a demand that is not satisfied by parents, many of whom according to a recent survey have not broached certain key issues related to sex even with their 15-year-olds (Taylor Nelson Sofres plc 2000).

3. Young people's judgements and opinions about sexual material in the media

Young people are also able to make judgements about what they do and do not like seeing on television. Of the two-thirds of respondents who had seen a programme or video that had 'too much' about sex in it, 64% had carried on watching, while the remainder (36%) had chosen to stop.

Thus, in relation to pop music, the quintessential youth form, 80% of 12-14-year-olds agreed that it was '*OK for pop stars to dance in a sexy way*'. They distinguished between '*showing*' and '*telling*': 64% agreed that '*talking about sex is not as bad as showing it*'.

Ten-year-old children were asked to rate how they feel about seeing, reading or hearing about a list of things. They, too, presented themselves as relatively unfazed by some media forms and representations: 67% either liked or thought it was '*OK*' to see adults '*getting carried away with their kissing*', 73% liked or accepted '*TV programmes or videos that show adults having problems in their love life*', 88% thought the same of adults '*kissing just a little bit*'. Eighty per cent similarly liked or accepted pop stars '*singing songs with rude words*', and a slightly lower proportion, 69%, accepted '*pop stars dancing in a sexy way*'. The Australian Broadcasting Authority's survey of 5-12-year-olds similarly found that children were able to exercise self-censorship about things that concerned them and noted that less than 10% of children mentioned programme incidents involving sex and nudity as having upset them (Sheldon *et al*. 1994).

Opinions were more evenly divided on the question of the propriety of newspaper images of 'naked women': while 41% of 12 and 14-year-olds agreed that newspapers should *not* show them, 45% disagreed. In response to the statements that 'advertisements and posters in public places should *not* show pictures of people doing sexy things', just over half (51%) of 12 and 14-year-olds rejected the idea of stricter controls on sexual portrayals in public places (disagreeing), while 31% thought that such portrayals were not acceptable (agreeing) and 18% didn't know. It may be that this greater equivocation indicates that they modulate their judgements according to the nature of the audience and how widely accessible the material is. However, in the context of the survey, older respondents were slightly more likely to endorse a 'libertarian' view, in that they disagreed with the statement. In the context of interviews, by contrast, all children made more nuanced judgements about the nature of the audience and acknowledged public concerns about such material. It may be that our discussions encouraged them to be more thoughtful, or alternatively that they encouraged children to give responses appropriate to 'good citizens' and to express a greater degree of 'concern' than they actually feel.

Among the 10-year-olds, pictures of scantily clad adults (particularly men) received the highest disapproval ratings. Sixty three per cent of respondents said that they did not like to see 'newspapers or magazines that show pictures of grown men with hardly any clothes on', while 50% said that they did *not* like to see '*newspapers or magazines that show pictures of*

grown women with hardly any clothes on'. Just over one-third of respondents (34%) said that they did *not* like to see posters or advertisements in public places that show pictures of people doing sexy things. From the list of 10 statements about sex and the media that we gave them, these were the three where fewer than half of respondents indicated that they would like to see something *or* thought it was okay to see this. As our qualitative data suggests, younger children may make judgements on the basis of notions of 'decency' or what is 'rude'.

Children who read *only* broadsheets were perhaps predictably more likely to disapprove of images of women with no clothes on. However, the numbers here were very small: nearly a third of children reported that they read both a tabloid and a broadsheet newspaper.

As they grow up, young people appear to become slightly more 'permissive'. For instance, 14-year-olds were less likely to agree that newspapers should not show pictures of naked women than 12-year-olds (37% compared to 45%). Twenty six per cent of 14-year-olds, but 35% of 12-year-olds, agreed that posters in public places should not show pictures of people doing sexy things. Older children are also more open to learning about lesbian and gay relationships. There was a significant change between the 12-year-olds and the 14-year-olds: 24% of the former thought there should be more about lesbian and gay relationships in the media, but among those two years older this increased to 32%, with a decline in those who *strongly* disagreed with this, from 36% to 24%. While those wanting more information are still in a minority, the increase may be more telling than the overall figures. It is also unclear whether disagreement necessarily indicates homophobic attitudes: it is not possible to tell whether those who disagreed therefore want less information available.

4. Social differences and media consumption

Gender and age were the most significant predictors of attitudes and behaviours in relation to the media that we found. In our survey, girls were almost as likely as boys to have a television in their bedroom - 91% of boys compared to 88% of girls, a figure that is not statistically significant. (By contrast, the 1999 Livingstone and Bovill study found that boys were statistically more likely than girls to have media – including, but not limited to, television and video - in their bedrooms). In terms of media-related behaviour, however, boys were more likely to present themselves as breaking parental rules on television watching – of those who answered the question, 80% said they broke at least one rule, compared to 70% of girls. As noted earlier, girls were more likely than boys to watch in their bedrooms and on their own.

More girls than boys were likely to be dedicated readers of magazines (33% of girls read two or more magazines frequently, compared to 24% of boys), and more boys than girls (9% compared to 3%) were non-readers. Nonetheless, 55% of boys read at least one magazine frequently. Interestingly, of those boys who answered the question on how useful magazines were as a source of information about sex, 57% stated that they were useful or very useful, compared to 71% of girls who answered the question. This may suggest that boys are more likely to read 'girls' teenage magazines than they admit (and boys more readily acknowledged reading such magazines in the survey than they did in interviews). However, some magazines aimed at a youth male market increasingly run 'problem pages',

generally of a more medical nature, and they may have been referring to these.

The charts below indicate that there are significant but perhaps predictable divergences of opinion between the girls and boys in our survey. In general, there seemed to be a tendency for the 12 and 14-year-old boys to be more emphatic in their responses – to tick 'agree strongly' where girls' responses were clustered within 'agree' or 'disagree'. For instance, while roughly equal numbers of boys and girls (around 90%) disagreed that they were too young to learn about sex, 67% of boys disagreed *strongly*, compared to 49% of girls. As in our interviews, there was an element of 'performing' gender even on the survey, in that boys tended to opt for the 'hot-blooded male heterosexual' options. For instance, 81% of boys compared to 52% of girls agreed that they liked to watch things made for adults. While 66% of girls agreed that newspapers shouldn't show pictures of naked women, only 15% of boys agreed – and 54% strongly disagreed. Eighty nine per cent of boys agreed that it was okay for pop stars to dance in a sexy way, compared to 73% of girls.

Higher numbers of boys agreed that sex education should start sooner – 61% compared to 47% of girls. Forty two per cent of girls disagreed – a response that on our interview evidence could be just as much because of their experience of boys' behaviour in these lessons than their own need for more information. However, the fact that boys appear to be enthusiastic about receiving more sex education may be because they have fewer alternatives than girls. As boys do not appear to find their fathers particularly useful, and as they are less likely to read magazines than girls, the issue for boys in learning about sex may be that they do so from a narrow range of sources – or from a different range, which may ultimately reinforce differences in gendered views of the issues.

There were fewer gendered divergences of opinion on those issues that concern the media's more general moral role in society – e.g. over whether the media helped young people make up their own minds about sex, understand right and wrong, whether there should be more information about lesbian and gay relationships in the media.

Among the 10-year-olds, the only questions on which there were significant divergences of opinions were those related to images of naked men and women. Seventy nine per cent of boys said that they did not like to see '*newspapers or magazines that show pictures of grown men with hardly any clothes on*', compared to 47% of girls. Fifty six per cent of girls said that they did not like to see newspapers or magazines that show pictures of grown women with hardly any clothes on, compared to 41% of boys. While this suggests that not all boys are enthusiastic about portrayals of female nudity, it also implies that girls are less rejecting of female nudity than boys are of male nudity – as, indeed, our interviewees discussed on many occasions. Meanwhile, 25% of boys asserted that they positively '*liked*' to see pictures of women with few clothes on, compared to 16% of girls who said the same about scantily clad men. The 'heterosexual logic' of looking, with its counterpart in male 'homosexual panic', discussed in Part One, would seem to be widespread, with boys 'knowing' from an early age how to assert normative sexual identities.

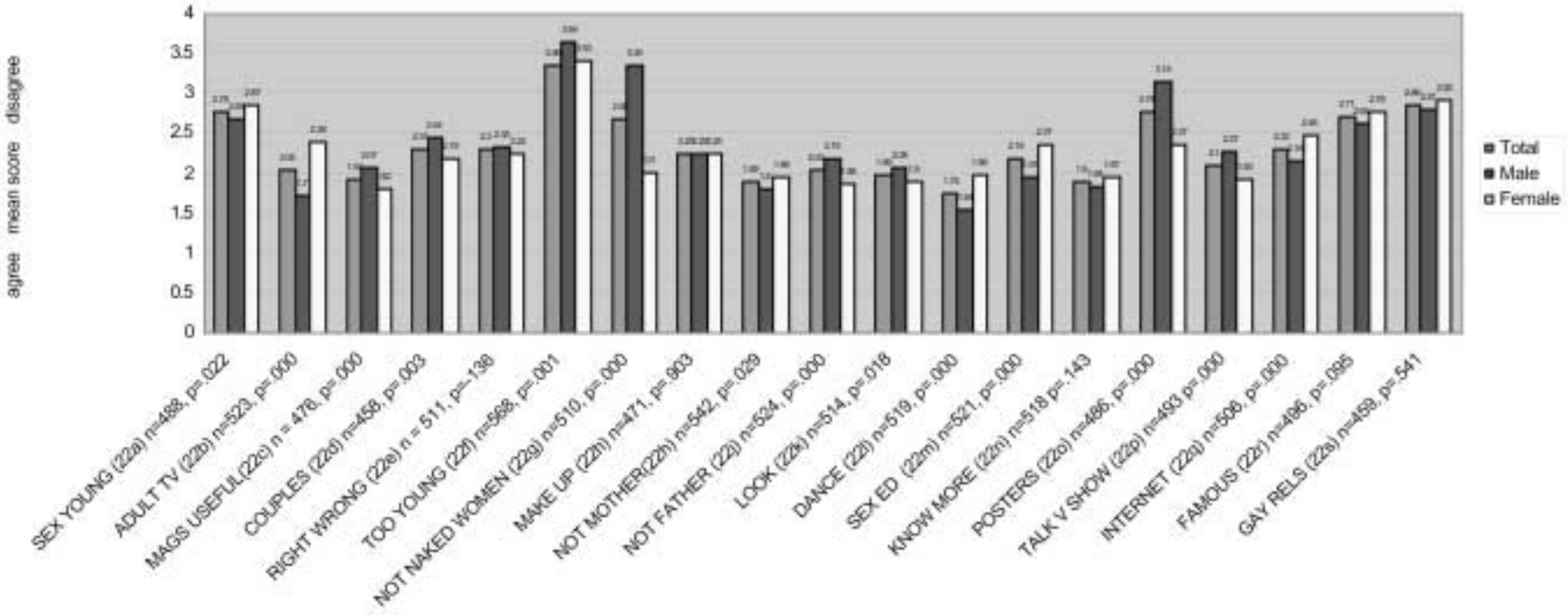
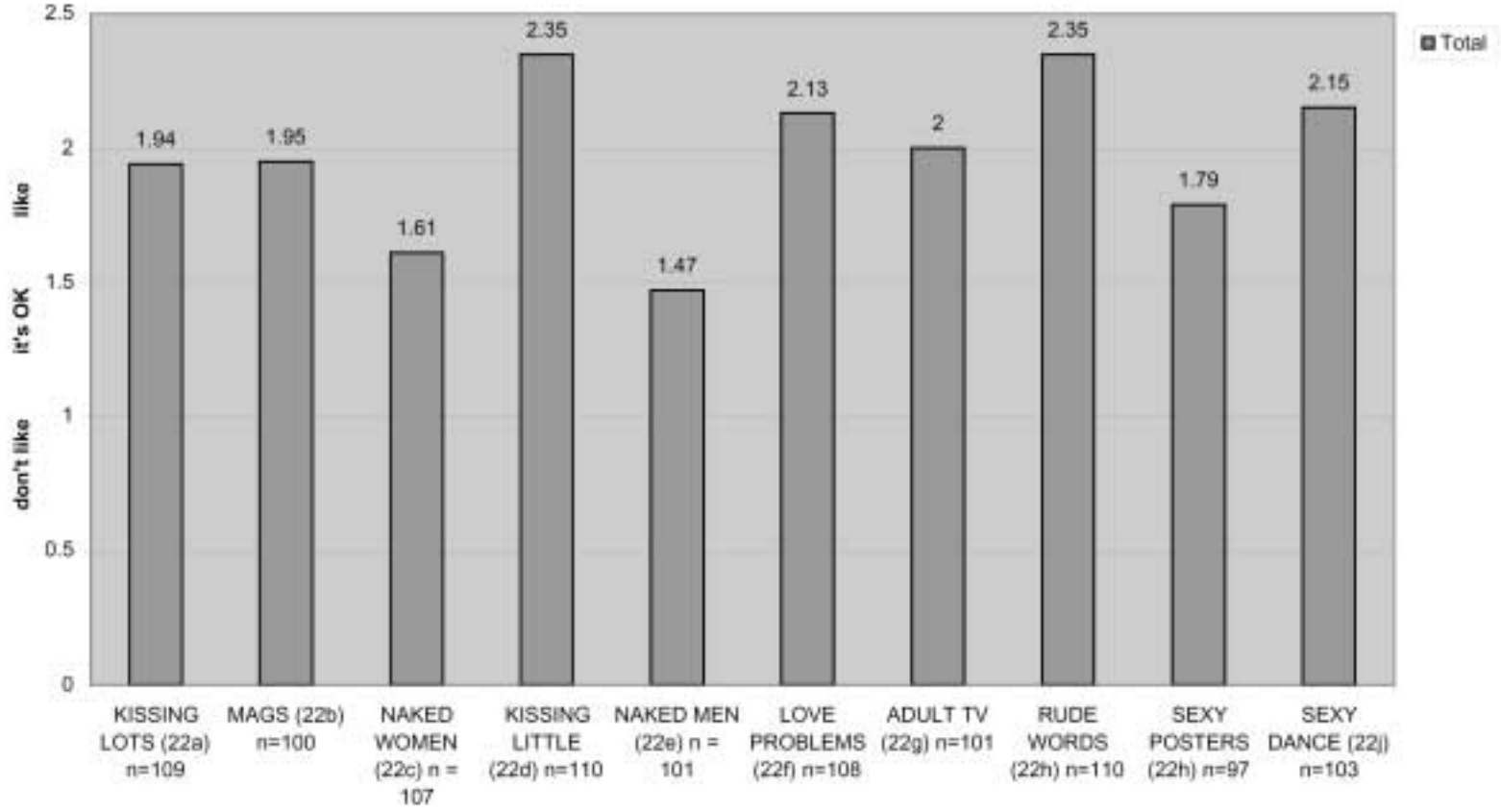


Chart: Responses to opinion questions by gender

Note that this chart excludes 'don't know' answers.
It shows significant associations between gender and responses to questions 22b, c, d, f, g, j, l, m, o, p, q.

Chart: 9-10 year old responses to opinion questions



Note that this chart also excludes 'don't know' answers. The numbers of 'don't knows' can be estimated from the figure given for the total number of cases (n), although for each question about two children did not answer at all (out of 119). No breakdown by gender is given as this was only significant in two cases – the questions about nudity.

As we have noted at various points in our analysis, age is also a factor: as they grow up, young people are more likely to use the media (including the internet) without parental regulation and on their own. They are more likely to find the media useful as a source of learning about love, sex and relationships, and are slightly less likely to turn to their parents. Their views, as we have noted, become slightly more 'permissive' on some issues with age, too.

Despite common perceptions, social class does not appear from our survey to be particularly relevant as a variable. (See Appendix I for an explanation of our definitions of social class.) Class does not make a difference to magazine readership or availability of cable and satellite television in the home, for example. Only the numbers of people living at home made a difference to the latter; the more people living at home, the greater the likelihood of the family having cable or satellite television. Children from working-class families are more likely to have a television in their bedroom: 95% have a television in their bedrooms compared to 86% of middle-class children. However, working-class children do not appear to be less likely to have their viewing regulated. Social class does have an impact on internet access, with middle-class children more likely to have it than working-class children.
The only question on opinions in which class appeared to be significant was one about viewing with one's father. Here, 74% of 12 and 14-year-olds from middle-class families, compared to 58% of working-class children, agreed that they do not like to see television programmes or videos with sex in when with their father. Although high proportions of children would appear to prefer not to watch sexual material in the company of their fathers, it would seem that children from working-class families are slightly less worried about doing so. However, working-class children were no more likely than middle-class ones to find their fathers useful as a source of information about sex. (They were slightly more likely to find their grandparents useful, but the numbers involved were quite low.)

As discussed in Appendix I, the numbers of children from religious backgrounds were too low to allow meaningful conclusions to be drawn from our data, but this should not be taken as meaning that religion makes no difference to opinions. Similarly, in the case of ethnicity (as measured by a question about speaking a second language at home), the numbers were often too small to make definitive statements about its role in relation to other questions. It seemed to have little impact on opinions, but did have some impact on material questions such as internet access: children from homes where two languages were spoken were marginally less likely to have internet access.

We ran tests to ascertain associations between size of family and sources of information about sex. The only significant – but predictable - finding here was that those in large families would be more likely to turn to their siblings for advice. Forty two per cent of those with three or more siblings stated that siblings were useful or very useful, compared to 25% of those with one or two siblings. Not surprisingly, youngest and (particularly) middle children are more likely to find siblings useful, compared with eldest children.

Postscript: a note on analysis

For the most part, the figures we report refer to the total numbers of those who responded to a question, excluding missing data (i.e. those who did not answer the question). This follows standard practice. However, there are inevitably points at which missing data might be significant and requires analysis. For instance, interestingly, fewer boys than girls (74% compared to 90%) answered the questions on how useful mothers were as a source of information about sex, and similarly for fathers, 68% of boys answered and 75% of girls. We might speculate on why boys chose not to answer this question. We also showed that 80% of respondents were positive about sex education lessons at school. However, those who answered constituted 45% of the total, suggesting that perhaps many young people had no experience of school sex education and that we should be cautious about concluding that young people resoundingly endorse it.

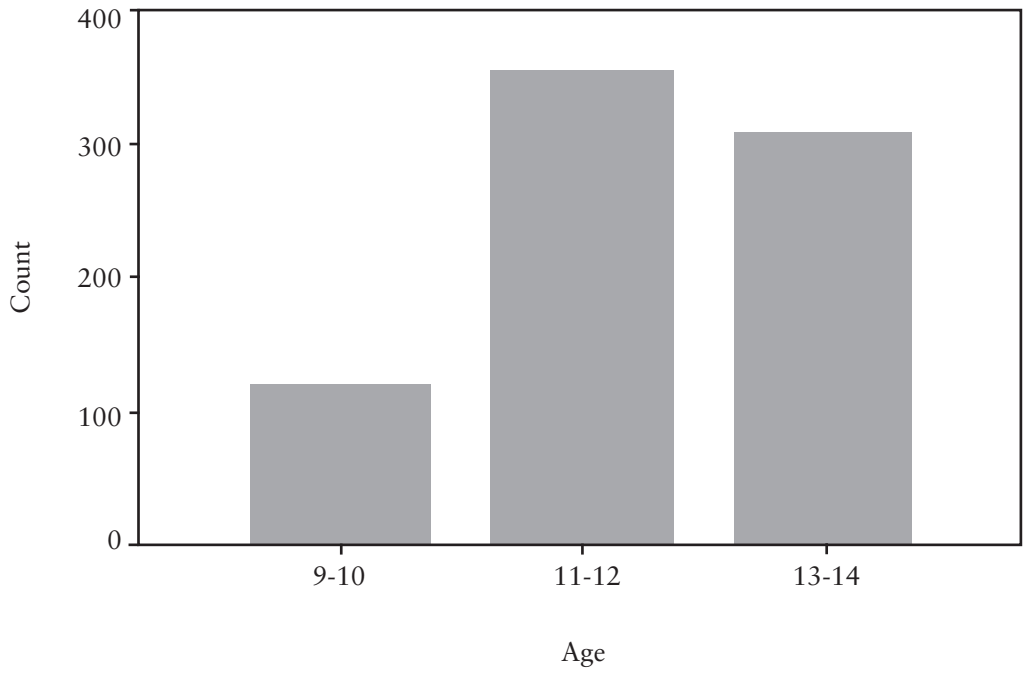
In reporting statistical significance, we are referring to the results of chi-square tests (Pearson's and Linear by Linear Association, as appropriate) to ascertain the degree of association between a range of factors.

Appendix 1: Profile of the respondents

There were 778 responses out of a possible 937. Of these 119 were aged 9-10, 353 were aged 11-12 and 306 13-14. While the youngest and oldest age groups were evenly balanced in terms of gender (50-50 and 51-49 male to female, respectively), among the 12-year-olds there were more girls than boys (55% to 45%). The total number of boys completing the survey was 352, of girls 375, with 51 missing responses.

Number of respondents by age

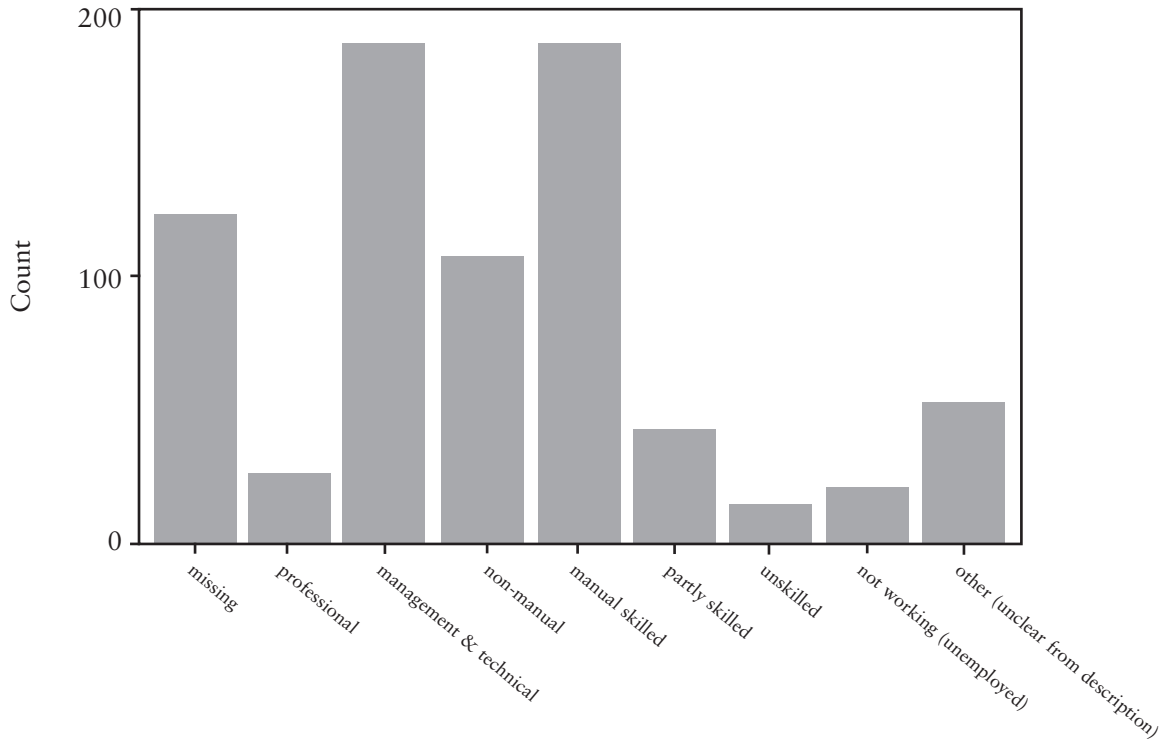
N = 778, N* = 0



Respondents were asked to describe their parents' or carers' occupations. We measured their social class position on the basis of the occupation of the father or sole earner in all cases where this could be ascertained. In 126 cases, no answer was received; in 56, the description given was unclear; and 26 stated that their parents were not working (unemployed, disabled, retired, home or student). From the valid per cent remaining if such cases were excluded, 56% of children were middle-class (i.e. had a parent engaged in non-manual work) and 44% were working-class (i.e. had a parent engaged in manual work).

Occupation of father or sole earner

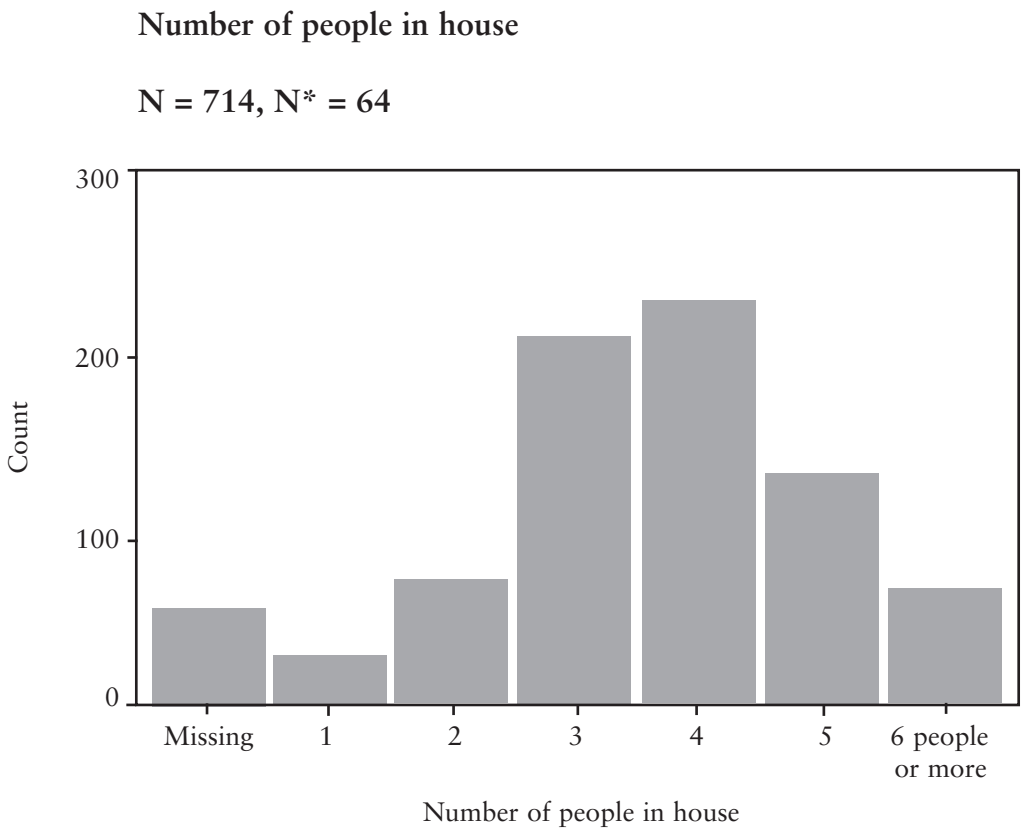
N = 652, N* = 126



In 62% of cases, the question on religion (the last on the form) was left unanswered. While one might speculate that those who did not answer the question do not go to church, it is not possible to base any analysis on this assumption. Fifteen per cent of those who did respond stated that they regularly (once a month or more) attended a church, temple, mosque, synagogue or other place of worship, although there was some variation within age groups. Only 9% of the 14-year-olds stated this, compared with 18% and 19% of the 12 and 10-year-olds respectively, perhaps reflecting the development of older children's choice in these matters. However, the numbers who did answer this question affirmatively (fewer than 30 in all) were too small for us to draw significant conclusions about the influence of religious faith or upbringing on views in this respect.

A more substantial total number responded to the question on whether their parent(s) spoke another language at home. Fourteen per cent of respondents stated that they did. This provides some guide to ethnicity, although this was not a substantial hypothesis in our survey design.

Children were asked how many people lived with them at home and which adults aged over 18 lived with them. Sixteen per cent of children were an only child or twin; 32% were the youngest child, 21% a middle child and 31% an oldest child. Sixty one per cent had one or two siblings; 23% lived in a large family with three or more siblings. These figures are roughly in line with the national picture.



In terms of access within the home to those media we asked about, this group appeared to be media-rich. The majority (87%) said that they had three or more televisions in the home. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (67%) said that they had cable or satellite television at home (social class was not relevant here). The vast majority of children (89% in all) also said that they had a television in their bedroom, 68% that it had a video and 18% that it had cable or satellite on it. The percentage gets higher with age.

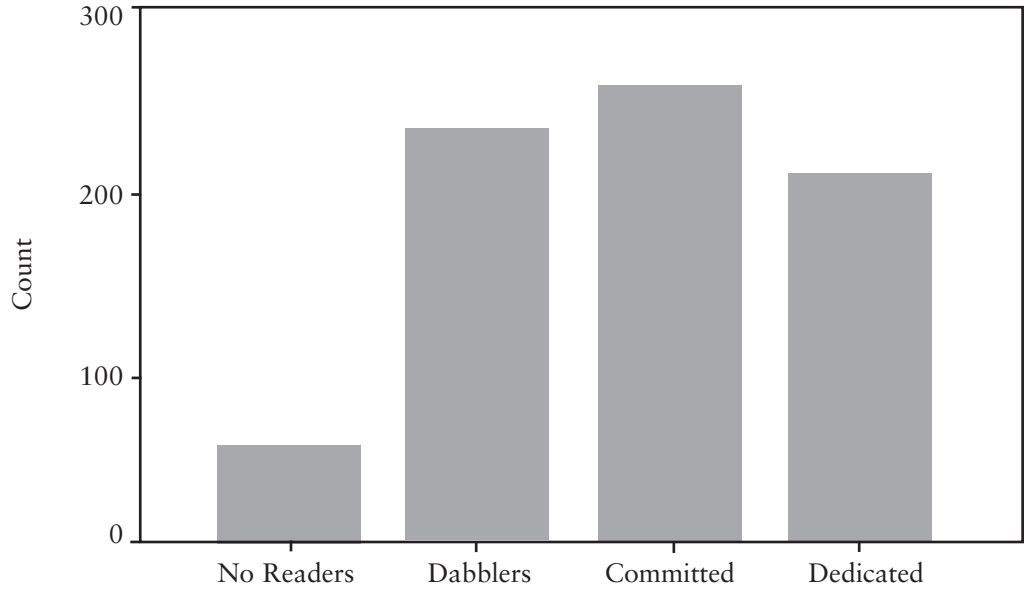
Seventy five per cent of children stated that they used the internet at home, which suggests not only that they have a home computer, but also that they are able to use it (a distinction made by Livingstone and Bovill 1999). Social class was significant here, with 85% of middle-class children using the internet at home, compared with only 67% of working-class children. Family size was not, however, relevant. Comparatively, the 1999-2000 Family Expenditure Survey found that 19% of households had access to the internet and that access depended very strongly on income: 50% of households in the highest income group had access compared with less than 10% in the lowest income groups.

A majority of respondents (88%) stated that they played a Gameboy or other computer console at home, although by ages 12 and 14 there was a statistically significant difference in gender, with girls less likely to do so than boys.

Seven per cent of children did not appear to read any magazines: 31% read magazines sometimes or occasionally, but did not read any magazine on a frequent basis ('dabblers'). Thirty four per cent were quite 'committed' readers, reading one magazine frequently (and possibly others occasionally or sometimes), and a further 29% might be described as 'dedicated', reading two or more magazines frequently (and also possibly others sometimes or occasionally). As noted earlier, girls were more likely to be dedicated readers, but class made no difference.

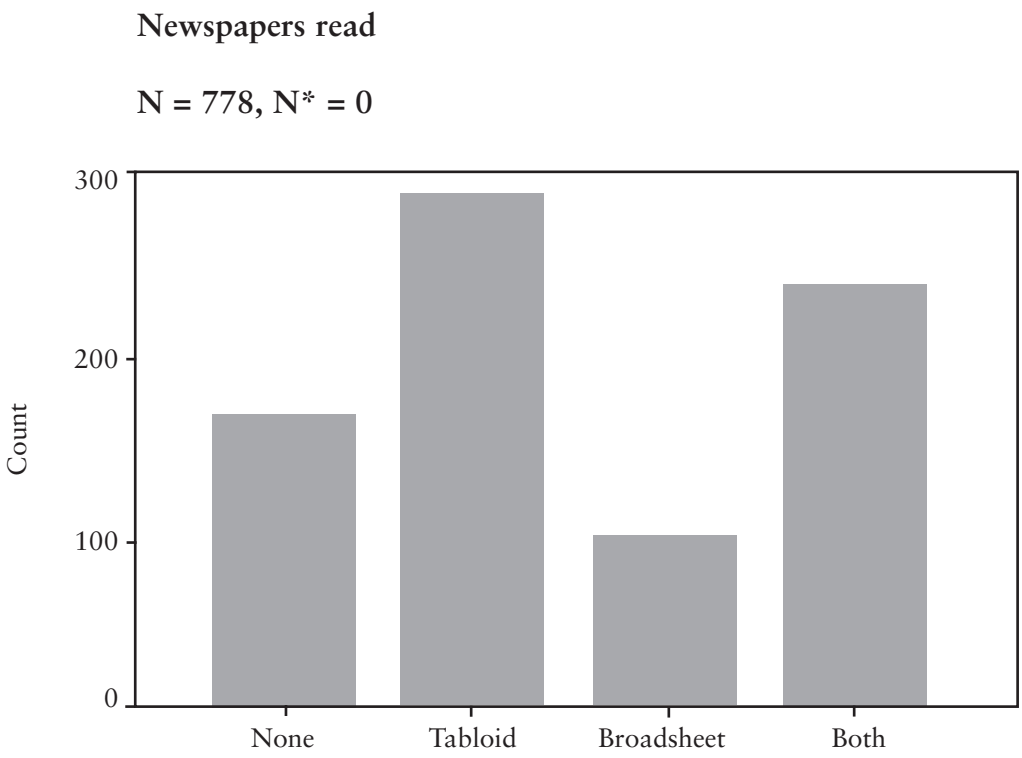
Magazine Readership

N = 778, N* = 0



In terms of newspaper readership, 21% did not tick any boxes from a list of newspaper titles so may be assumed not to read a newspaper. Thirty six per cent read a tabloid, 13% read only a broadsheet and 31% read both. The Sun is the clear favourite for children in all groups: 44% of the 10-year-olds, 53% of the 12-year-olds and 51% of the 14-year-olds said that they read this paper either every/most days or sometimes. The Mirror and The Mail were also particularly popular. The broadsheets tended to trail behind most of the tabloids. The Telegraph was the least popular of the broadsheets: among the 14-year- olds, for example, 51% read The Sun, compared with only 4% who read The Telegraph.

The Times was the most popular broadsheet, followed by The Guardian. A sizeable proportion of children in each group said that they read a paper other than those listed – very possibly a local paper. Tests of association were run between views about the depiction of naked women in newspapers and tabloid or broadsheet readership. However, the numbers who read *only* broadsheets were very small (79 respondents) and, although larger proportions were perhaps predictably more likely to disapprove (64%), it would be unwarranted to draw larger conclusions from this. There was no statistical significance on the issue of whether those who read particular types of newspaper were more, or less, likely to enjoy reading about the sex lives of famous people.



Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Year 7 Survey no.

YOUNG PEOPLE AND MEDIA IMAGES OF LOVE, SEX & RELATIONSHIPS...

We are carrying out a study for the people who make decisions about what should and should not be shown in the media. They want to know young people's views on how love, sex and relationships are shown in the media – that is, on TV or radio, in films, advertisements and posters, magazines, newspapers, pop music and so on.

We have already talked to some of the people in your year at this school. Now we would like to know what EVERYONE in the year thinks. Your views count and will be listened to. Please complete the questions as carefully and honestly as you can by putting a tick in the box. If you make a mistake or change your mind, just put a cross through the wrong answer.

This is PRIVATE. No one else will be allowed to see what you write or find out how you answered the questions. THANK YOU!

The Institute of Education, London University

You & Television

1 Do you have a television in your home?
- ☐ NO – *go to Question 10*
- ☐ YES

2 ...If YES, how many?
- ☐ One
- ☐ Two
- ☐ Three
- ☐ Four or more

3 Do you get cable or satellite TV in your home?
- ☐ NO
- ☐ YES

4 Do you have a television in your bedroom?
- ☐ NO – *go to Question 7*
- ☐ YES

5 ...If YES, does it have a video?
- ☐ NO
- ☐ YES

6 Do you get cable or satellite TV on it?
- ☐ NO
- ☐ YES

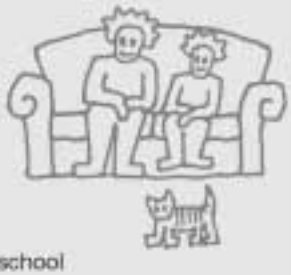
7 Where do you mostly watch TV in your home? (tick one)
- ☐ In the main room where everyone often sits
- ☐ In my bedroom
- ☐ In my brother or sister's bedroom
- ☐ In my parents' bedroom
- ☐ Somewhere else

Designed by erica@wordsmithdesign.co.uk

More about you and TV...

8 **Do you mostly watch TV alone or with other people?**

- ☐ Alone
- ☐ With others



9 **How often do you usually watch TV?**

- ☐ Every day
- ☐ Most days but not every day
- ☐ A few days a week
- ☐ Only on weekends
- ☐ A few times a month
- ☐ Only at other people's homes or at school
- ☐ I don't watch TV

computers...

10 **Do you use the Internet at home?**

- ☐ NO – *go to Question 12*
- ☐ YES

11 **... If YES, do your parents watch what you are doing when you are on the Internet?**

- ☐ No, never
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Yes, mostly
- ☐ Yes, always

12 **Do you play a gameboy or other computer console at home?**

- ☐ NO
- ☐ YES

13 Magazines...

Which of the following magazines do you read? – Include those you might borrow from a friend or brother/sister.

	Frequently (most issues)	**Sometimes** (every other issue or less)	**Occasionally**
SHOOT / Football magazine	☐	☐	☐
SUGAR	☐	☐	☐
Skateboard magazine	☐	☐	☐
Computer game magazine	☐	☐	☐
MORE	☐	☐	☐
MIZZ	☐	☐	☐
MAX POWER	☐	☐	☐
MAXIM	☐	☐	☐
KERRANG	☐	☐	☐
J17	☐	☐	☐
FHM	☐	☐	☐
COSMOGIRL	☐	☐	☐
BLISS	☐	☐	☐
Others: (please list)			
	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐

Newspapers...

14 **Which of the following newspapers do you read? (Tick ALL that apply, even if you only read some sections such as the TV guide, star signs or sports pages and not all of it)**

	Every day/most days	Sometimes
THE MAIL	☐	☐
THE SPORT	☐	☐
THE STAR	☐	☐
THE EXPRESS	☐	☐
THE TELEGRAPH	☐	☐
THE GUARDIAN	☐	☐
THE MIRROR	☐	☐
THE SUN	☐	☐
NEWS OF THE WORLD	☐	☐
THE SUNDAY PEOPLE	☐	☐
THE TIMES	☐	☐
OTHER	☐	☐

Dos and don'ts...

15 **In some families, there may be rules about watching TV... Are there any rules in your home?**

- ☐ NO, I can watch anything I like
- ☐ NO, I don't watch TV at home

YES – ***tick any that apply***

- ☐ I'm only allowed to watch a certain amount of TV (e.g. one hour a day)
- ☐ I can only watch at a certain time
- ☐ I can't watch while I am eating
- ☐ I have to finish my homework or special jobs first
- ☐ I am not allowed to watch some programmes
- ☐ I am not allowed to watch 15 certificate videos
- ☐ I am not allowed to watch 18 certificate videos
- ☐ I am not allowed to watch TV at other people's homes
- ☐ I have to switch the TV off by _____ o'clock

16 **If you do have rules about watching TV, do you ever break them?**

- ☐ NO, because I do what I am told
- ☐ NO, because I agree with the rules

YES – ***tick any that apply***

- ☐ I can sometimes persuade my parents to let me watch videos or programmes even if they don't want me to
- ☐ My father sometimes lets me watch programmes my mother doesn't want me to see
- ☐ My mother sometimes lets me watch programmes my father doesn't want me to see
- ☐ My older brother or sister sometimes lets me watch programmes or videos I am not supposed to
- ☐ I sometimes watch programmes or videos I shouldn't on another TV in my house
- ☐ I sometimes watch programmes or videos I shouldn't at a friend's house
- ☐ I sometimes secretly watch programmes or videos I am not supposed to

Thinking about love, sex and relationships in particular...

17 **As far as you know, have your parents or carers ever tried to stop you watching TV programmes or videos because they had too much about sex in them?**

- ☐ NO – *go to question 19*
- ☐ YES

18 **If YES, what happened? (tick any that apply)**

- ☐ I was sent out of the room
- ☐ I was made to do something else
- ☐ I was told to look away or cover my eyes
- ☐ The channel was changed
- ☐ The TV was turned off
- ☐ I was allowed to carry on watching once the scene had finished

19 **Have YOU ever stopped watching a TV programme or video because you thought it had too much about sex in it?**

- ☐ NO – I've never seen a programme that had too much about sex in it
- ☐ NO – I've never *stopped watching* a programme that had too much about sex in it
- ☐ YES

20 **Has a parent ever talked to you about love, sex or relationships (including about bodies and how they work) because of something you were watching together on TV?**

- ☐ NO – *go to question 21*
- ☐ YES

If YES, would you say this was...

- ☐ something you did not want to talk about
- ☐ something you were glad to talk about

Learning about love, sex and relationships

21 **There are many ways to find out about love, sex and relationships. How useful are any of the following?**

Tick 'Don't know' if you've never asked or found out in this way.

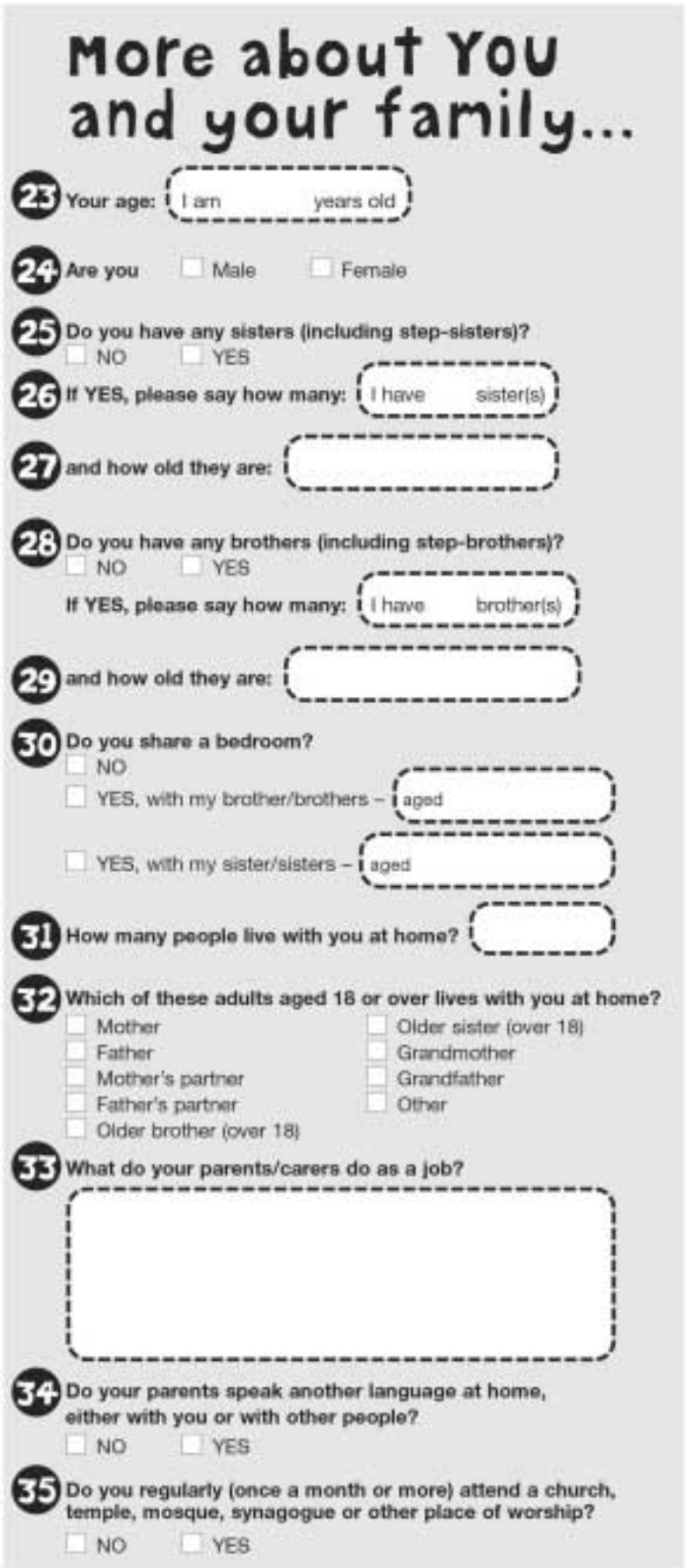
	Very useful	Useful	Not useful	Don't know	Doesn't apply
Mother	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Father	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Mother's partner	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Father's partner	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Brothers or sisters	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Grandparents	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends or cousins who are older	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Friends or cousins who are my age	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
TV	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Magazines	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Radio	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Posters / advertisements	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sex education lessons at school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Books and leaflets	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

more...

Your Opinions

22 **Thinking about the media – that is, about TV, advertising and posters, magazines, films, pop music, radio, newspapers and so on, tick the boxes to show whether you agree with the following statements**

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Don't know
The media encourage young people to have sex too young	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I like to watch TV programmes that are made for adults	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Teenage magazines give useful information about relationships and sex	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I would like to see more happy couples in TV programmes	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The media try to help young people understand the difference between right and wrong	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I'm too young to learn about sex	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Tabloid newspapers shouldn't show pictures of naked women	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The media try to help young people make up their own minds about sex	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't like to see TV programmes or videos with sex in when I'm with my mother	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I don't like to see TV programmes or videos with sex in when I'm with my father	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The media make young people too concerned about how they look	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It's OK for pop stars to dance in a sexy way	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Sex education should start sooner than it does now	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I know more about sex than my parents think I do	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Advertisements and posters in public places shouldn't show pictures of people doing sexy things	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Talking about sex is not as bad as showing it	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
It's hard to avoid stuff about sex on the internet	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I like reading about the sex lives of famous people	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
There should be more about lesbian and gay relationships in the media	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐


More about YOU and your family...
23 Your age: I am years old
24 Are you Male Female
25 Do you have any sisters (including step-sisters)?
NO YES
26 If YES, please say how many: I have sister(s)
27 and how old they are:
28 Do you have any brothers (including step-brothers)?
NO YES
If YES, please say how many: I have brother(s)
29 and how old they are:
30 Do you share a bedroom?
NO
YES, with my brother/brothers – aged
YES, with my sister/sisters – aged
31 How many people live with you at home?
32 Which of these adults aged 18 or over lives with you at home?
Mother
Father
Mother's partner
Father's partner
Older brother (over 18)
Older sister (over 18)
Grandmother
Grandfather
Other
33 What do your parents/carers do as a job?
34 Do your parents speak another language at home, either with you or with other people?
NO YES
35 Do you regularly (once a month or more) attend a church, temple, mosque, synagogue or other place of worship?
NO YES

What's OK? (asked of Year 5 students only i.e. aged 10)

How do you feel about seeing, reading or hearing about the things on this list?

Options: I like to see or hear this/it's OK to see or hear this/I don't like to see or hear this/I don't know

a) TV programmes or videos that show adults getting carried away with their kissing
b) Magazines that tell young people about love, sex and relationships
c) Newspapers or magazines that show pictures of grown women with hardly any clothes on
d) TV programmes or videos with adults kissing just a little bit
e) Newspapers or magazines that show pictures of grown men with hardly any clothes on
f) TV programmes or videos that show adults having problems in their love life
g) TV programmes or videos that are made for adults
h) Pop stars singing songs with rude words
i) Posters or advertisements in public places that show pictures of people doing sexy things
j) Pop stars dancing in a sexy way

Appendix 3: Summary of television extracts and other material used in the qualitative research

All age groups

Trisha: Trisha interviews a jealous woman and her boyfriend and he proposes marriage

Jerry Springer: a confrontation between two sisters who have been sleeping with the same man

Britney Spears: I'll Be a Slave for You: Britney recorded live at the Brit Awards, dancing with a snake

Robbie Williams: Rock DJ: music video featuring Robbie stripping in order to impress an indifferent female audience

Jay-Z: Girls, Girls, Girls: rapper Jay-Z boasting of his numerous romantic liaisons

Missy Elliot, Lil' Kim, Pink, Christina Aguilera - Lady Marmalade: music video from the film *Moulin Rouge* featuring the four rappers as burlesque dancers

Advertisements:
Opium (Sophie Dahl); *Lee Jeans* ('Put the boot in'); *Levi's Jeans* ('Twisted to fit')

9-10-year-olds only

Grange Hill: edited storyline: Tom and Leah agree to sleep together, but Leah subsequently accuses Tom of raping her

SM:TV Live: *Chums*: Ant, Dec and Cat receive visits from various celebrity 'girlfriends'

9-10 and 11-12-year-olds only

Friends: The six friends recollect when they first met and the romantic relationships that nearly happened

The Simpsons: Homer and Marge discover the thrill of having sex in public places, with hilarious consequences

11-12 and 13-14-year-olds only

Teen magazines:
Selection of pages from Cosmo Girl, Mizz and others (problem page, male pin-up, sex education advertisement)

Tabloid newspapers:
Selection of pages from News of the World and The Sun (celebrity gossip, female pin-up, Calvin Klein ad, Amy Gehring story)

13-14 and 16-17-year-olds only

Friends: Phoebe meets up with her gay husband, who announces he is really straight and wants a divorce

Dawson's Creek: Joey and Pacey finally sleep together while on a school journey; Jen and her gay friend Jack almost do the same

16-17-year-olds only

As If: drama focusing on jealousy and infidelity among both gay and straight couples

So Graham Norton: guests recount their most embarrassing sexual experiences

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Appendix 5: Researchers' credits

David Buckingham is a Professor of Education in the Culture, Communication and Societies Group at the Institute of Education, London University. He is Director of the Institute's Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media (www.ccsonline.org.uk/mediacentre). He has been course tutor on the English and Media Studies Postgraduate Certificate in Education and now teaches primarily at MA and PhD level. Professor Buckingham has directed a number of research projects on media education and on children's relationship with the media, funded by organisations such as the Economic and Social Research Council, the Broadcasting Standards Commission, the Arts Council of England, the European Commission, the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Spencer and Nuffield Foundations. He has addressed conferences in more than 20 overseas countries, and his work has been translated into 10 languages. He is the author, co-author or editor of 15 books, including *Public Secrets: EastEnders and its Audience* (British Film Institute, 1987), *Children Talking Television: The Making of Television Literacy* (Falmer, 1993), *Moving Images: Understanding Children's Emotional Responses to Television* (Manchester University Press, 1996), *The Making of Citizens: Young People, News and Politics* (Routledge, 2000), *After the Death of Childhood: Growing Up in the Age of Electronic Media* (Polity, 2000) *and Media Education: Literacy, Learning and Contemporary Culture* (Polity, 2003).

Sara Bragg is currently a Research Fellow on the project *Consulting Students about Teaching and Learning*, directed by Dr. Michael Fielding, at the University of Sussex; and a Research Officer on the project *Children, Media and Personal Relationships* directed by Professor David Buckingham, at the Institute of Education, London. Her research interests include the culture of education; cultural and media studies and their relevance to exploring issues in pedagogy; consumer culture and its impact on schooling; issues of class, ethnicity, sexuality and gender etc in relation to education; reflexive methodologies in research. Her Ph.D., from the Institute of Education, was entitled *Media Violence and Education: A study of youth audiences and the horror genre* (2000). She has published on aspects of media and education in the Journal of Popular Film and Television and Velvet Light Trap; in books including *Ill Effects* (Barker and Petley, eds.) and *The Power of Media Education* (Nowak, Abel and Ross, eds.).

Appendix 6: Advertising Standards Authority

Established in 1962, the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) promotes and enforces the highest standards in all non-broadcast advertisements by supervising the advertising industry's self regulation system. The ASA ensures that all who commission, prepare and publish advertisements in non-broadcast media in the United Kingdom observe the British Codes of Advertising and Sales Promotion, written by the Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP). CAP comprises representatives from 20 trade and professional associations representing all sectors of the advertising and media industry.

The Codes require that advertising shall be 'legal, decent, honest and truthful', socially responsible and prepared in line with the principles of fair competition. They reverse the burden of proof applied in law: it is for advertisers to prove the claims they make; if they cannot do so, then the advertisement must be withdrawn. The ASA Council endorses the Codes, adjudicates complaints under the Codes and administers the Codes in the spirit as well as the letter.

Advertising Standards Authority
2 Torrington Place
London
WC1E 7HW
Tel: 020 7580 5555
Fax: 020 7631 3051
Website: www.asa.org.uk

Appendix 7: British Board of Film Classification

The BBFC classifies films for cinema exhibition on behalf of local authorities, and videos, DVDs and some video games under the Video Recordings Act 1984. The BBFC is a private limited company funded wholly by the fees charged for classification.

British Board of Film Classification
3 Soho Square
London W1 3HD
Tel: 020 7440 1570
Fax: 020 7287 0141
E-mail: webmaster@bbfc.co.uk
Website: www.bbfc.co.uk

Appendix 8: British Broadcasting Corporation

The British Broadcasting Corporation is the world's largest public service broadcaster providing programmes and content through digital, analogue, cable and satellite services, as well as on-line. It aims to be the world's most creative and trusted broadcaster, seeking to satisfy all of its audiences with services that inform, educate, entertain and enrich their lives in ways that the market alone will not. The BBC also aims to be guided by its public purposes, to encourage the United Kingdom's most innovative talent, to act independently of all interests and to aspire to the highest ethical standards. The BBC has a global reputation for setting standards and the corporation's Editorial Policy team advises programme-makers across the BBC on the most difficult editorial issues and helps them to achieve the highest editorial and ethical standards as set out in its public statement of standards and values, the BBC Producers' Guidelines. Editorial Policy also acts as the point of contact for outside bodies on editorial matters and, as with this report, undertakes research to enable the BBC to stay in touch with the views of its audiences on a wide range of broadcasting issues.

Viewers and listeners with serious complaints about what is broadcast by BBC licence fee funded services on television, radio and on-line may write to the Programme Complaints Unit, Broadcasting House, London W1A 1AA. The Unit, which reports to the Director-General, is commissioned to investigate complaints impartially and independently of the interests of the programme-makers. Appeals against its findings are considered by the BBC Governors' Programme Complaints Appeals Committee. BBC e-mail addresses are listed on www.bbc.co.uk/talk. Other comments about BBC programmes and policies can be addressed to BBC Information, PO Box 1922, Glasgow, G2 3WT, tel: 0870 00 0222 (calls may be recorded). Minicom 0780 00 022.

British Broadcasting Corporation
Broadcasting House
Portland Place
London W1A 1AA
Tel: 020 7580 4468
Website: www.bbc.co.uk

Appendix 9: Broadcasting Standards Commission

The Broadcasting Standards Commission is the statutory body for both standards and fairness in broadcasting. It is the only organisation within the regulatory framework of UK broadcasting to cover all television and radio. This includes the BBC and commercial broadcasters, as well as text, cable, satellite and digital services.

As an independent organisation, the Broadcasting Standards Commission considers the portrayal of violence, sexual conduct and matters of taste and decency. It also provides redress for people who believe they have been unfairly treated or subjected to unwarranted infringement of privacy. The Commission has three main tasks set out in the 1996 Broadcasting Act:

- Produce codes of practice relating to standards and fairness;
- Consider and adjudicate on complaints;
- Monitor, research and report on standards and fairness in broadcasting.

This research working paper is published as part of a programme into attitudes towards standards and fairness in broadcasting. This research, which was carried out by independent experts, is not a statement of Commission policy. Its role is to offer guidance and practical information to Commissioners and broadcasters in their work.

Broadcasting Standards Commission
7 The Sanctuary
London SW1P 3JS
Tel: 020 7808 1000
Fax: 020 7233 0397
E-mail: bsc@bsc.org.uk
Website: http://www.bsc.org.uk

Appendix 10: Independent Television Commission

Operating in the interests of viewers, the Independent Television Commission is the public body which licenses and regulates all television services broadcasting in or from the United Kingdom, other than BBC licence fee funded services and S4C in Wales.

The Broadcasting Acts of 1990 and 1996 charge the ITC with tasks that include:

- setting standards for programme content, advertising, sponsorship and technical quality
- monitoring broadcasters' output to ensure that it meets those standards and applying a range of penalties if it doesn't
- ensuring that broadcasters operate in an environment which encourages innovation and widens viewer choice
- ensuring that viewers can receive television services on fair and competitive terms
- investigating complaints and regularly publishing its findings.

Each year the ITC undertakes an extensive audience research programme to help identify areas where viewer attitudes or behaviour may be changing. It liaises regularly with stakeholders, including consumer groups, and takes advice from its own advertising, schools, medical and religious advisory committees.

The Independent Television Commission
33 Foley Street
London
W1W 7TL
Tel: 020 7255 3000
Fax: 020 7306 7800
Minicom: 020 7306 7753
E-mail: publicaffairs@itc.org.uk
Website: www.itc.org.uk