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Are the Kids All Right? What TV Shows Get Wrong About Teen Dating

By Radhamely De Leon

When we first see doe-eyed Aimee Gibbs (Aimee Lee Wood) in the pilot of the hit teen show *Sex Education*, she's completely nude. She's talking dirty to her boyfriend, Adam (Connor Swindells), who's ignoring her in his effort to have an orgasm. The image of what looks like two adults obscures the fact that these are supposed to be two 16-year-olds having sex on a squeaky twin-sized bed while Adam's oblivious parents watch TV downstairs.

For *Sex Education*, a show about teenagers exploring their sexuality, it's a typical scene, even a mild one. "We are the deviant youths having loads of S-E-X," character Jackson Marchetti (Kedar Williams-Stirling) announces in the show's season one finale.

But are teenagers really having that much sex?

The Center for Disease Control's biannual [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) shows a steady downward trend in the number of sexually active teenagers in America since the 1990s. Only 38 percent of teens in 2019 reported ever having had sexual intercourse, dramatically down from 54 percent in 1991.

Teens who were sexually active in 2019 also reported having fewer sexual partners than teens in previous years, and even fewer reported forgoing contraception the last time they had intercourse. In fact, the only increase in data over the last 20 years was in how many teens said they used condoms the last time they had sex.

When you look at these numbers, it's not surprising to find that teens in real life view the current crop of popular teen shows—of which there are scores, including *Euphoria*, *Gossip Girl*, *Riverdale* and *Elite*, all of which have storylines focused on romance and sex—with skepticism.

"I think the overall consensus [among teens] about TV shows portraying teenagers is that it's kind of inaccurate," said Emma, a 14-year-old in New York City. Her friend Clementine, also 14, agreed. "Everything they think they know about teenagers is, like, turned up to 200 percent," Clementine said. Both teens declined to use their last names, citing privacy concerns.

The two girls were celebrating a friend's 15th birthday in Union Square Park on the sunny Sunday afternoon we met. They and their friends were so uninterested in media that they felt failed to accurately depict their lives that, when asked about the recent slew of shows about teens, they had a hard time even naming any they enjoyed watching.

"In TV shows, teenagers are always in very committed, adult relationships and I feel like that's not accurate," said Clementine. "They have a lot of problems and they always communicate a bunch, and that's not how it is." Committed relationships are rare among her friends or classmates, she said, and what relationships there are tend to be short-lived and not nearly as dramatic as what is typically shown on television.

This group of teens agreed that popular shows get teen dating and sexuality wrong in a number of ways, starting with the amount of dating that actually goes on.

“Personally, I find dating at all at our age kind of cringey,” Emma said.

Television shows also fail to show just how social media has overwhelmed teen dating, according to other teens I spoke to. Romantic connections, they said, are more likely to be made over Instagram and Snapchat than at house parties or other in-person types of gatherings frequently seen on television. Unsupervised hangouts that do occur are more likely to take place in public areas like parks—which Clementine called “park culture,” referring to how New York City teens meet up and hang out in major city parks across the boroughs.

Mateo Cruz, an 18-year-old studying from TK, Connecticut, described how dating usually happens on social media: Teens find prospective dating partners through their current connections and shared connections with others. From behind a screen, they are able to curate their profiles to present themselves in the best possible light. Socializing remotely allows them to present themselves however they want, but it also reduces the authenticity of their communication.

Like many teens I spoke to, the college freshman seemed generally uninterested in dating. “I, personally, am not,” he said. “I’m trying to work on myself.”

Could this be part of what accounts for the so-called “sex recession?” In a [2018 piece in *The Atlantic*](#) about why teens and young adults were less sexually active than ever before, writer Kate Julian pointed to helicopter parenting and an increase in hook-up culture as some of the other possible factors driving down dating and romance for teens.

“Each wave of teenagers had sex a little later [since the 1990s],” Julian wrote, “and the pregnancy rate kept inching down. You wouldn’t have known either of these things, though, from all the hyperventilating about hookup culture that started in the late ’90s.”

While the hyperventilating still goes on, the portrayal of sexually active teenagers hasn’t let up, either. *Gossip Girl* scandalized parents so much after its 2007 debut that the showrunners used their criticisms as advertisements. Who can forget the posters of Serena Van Der Woodsen, a 17-year-old portrayed by then-21-year-old actress Blake Lively, getting her neck kissed by a man with the emboldened words, “Every parent’s nightmare,” splashed across the bottom.

The themes explored in racy teen shows like *Gossip Girl* have been revisited countless times on television since, apparently remaining the perfect formula for making adults panic.

Precocious teen characters were once seen as a unique addition to television shows but soon became the norm on screen, leading to more teenagers acting increasingly adult. Much like *Sex Education*, *Gossip Girl* and *Euphoria*’s sex scenes are nearly indistinguishable from adult sex scenes, partially because production companies typically use adult actors in these roles. The sex romps on these shows are often bookended by those same teenaged characters attending classes or fighting with their parents.

In 2020, researchers at the University of Arizona examined sexual behaviors and relationships depicted in tween, teen and young adult shows in order “to understand what messages younger audiences are receiving about the relational context of sexual encounters.” The study noted sexual behaviors from episodes of 70 television shows from 2016 such as *Austin & Ally*, *Awkward*, *Pretty Little Liars*, *Glee*, *Teen Wolf* and more. It found that sexual behaviors in committed relationships outnumbered those in non-committed, casual relationships at a rate of about 2:1. It did find, however, that sexual intercourse was more likely to occur in casual screen relationships than in committed relationships, which mostly showed kissing and intimate touching.

“The media often are blamed for perpetuating a hookup culture,” the study says. “However, the common wisdom that hookups are deteriorating the romantic and sexual well-being of young people, sometimes referred to as a ‘moral panic’ about the hookup culture, may be fueled by a mediated exaggeration rather than an actual phenomenon, as young adults are having less sex than previous generational cohorts.”

Euphoria is the most recent show to be criticized for its graphic depictions of teen dating violence, drug use and sexuality. Despite criticisms, the HBO show is critically acclaimed and has already secured nine Emmy Award nominations and three wins, including Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series for Zendaya.

Common Sense Media, a media review website for parents and families, [ranked *Euphoria*](#) four out of five stars and claimed it was best for viewers ages 18 and over. The average reviews from kids said it was suitable for ages 15 and up.

Individual reviews ranged from one to five stars with varying levels of disgust and acclaim. Reviewers left starkly different opinions about whether this was suitable for teens at all, showing that the lines between teen and adult television shows are increasingly blurring as show creators take more liberties.

“Definitely NOT for children (or young teenagers),” one commenter said. “It’s off to a very intriguing start, but DON’T BE FOOLED—even if your kid tries to convince you it’s “not that bad.”... yeah, it’s pretty bad.” Another adult commenter said it was appropriate for ages 15 and up, describing it as an “on point portrayal of what goes on behind parents’ backs.”

Zendaya’s portrayal of Rue, an emotionally complicated teenager struggling with love and addiction, helped cement her career outside of Disney. But having a 25-year-old actress portray a teenager contributes to a larger issue that has long been criticized by teens. The age difference between actors and the characters they portray can contribute to unrealistic body image issues in teen audiences, leading to issues with confidence when approaching dating during this particularly formative time in their lives.

For Xavier Castro, a teen from West Nyack, New York, the family sitcom *One Day At A Time* did a good job of portraying teens with age-appropriate actors, namely Alex Alvarez, the youngest son of the family. Alvarez is portrayed by the 18-year-old actor Marcel Ruiz.

“It's not like he was portrayed by an actor who's, like, 25 years old that's shredded,” Xavier, 17, said. “He looked like a normal teenage boy.” Castro also pointed out that Isabella Gomez, who portrays Ruiz's older sister Elena, also looked her character's age due to her big glasses and simple, functional wardrobe. In real life, Gomez is 23 years old.

Casting decisions such as these are an underestimated and often ignored impact that television shows have on teens. The material and commercial impact of shows can be easily observed in a number of ways. *Euphoria* made waves in fashion and makeup trends because of how its characters reflected Gen Z's experimental approach to style. *The OC* brought indie music to the mainstage in the early aughts. But casting decisions don't just impact ratings. It can have a similarly detrimental effect as recent research has shown social media does.

“If there's a TV show that's high school-based, and it shows this guy who's super strong and buff and he gets like all the girls, it makes other people want to try to be like that,” Xavier said. “I'm influenced by that.”

This is so common that shows that do cast actors within the age group of their characters have been seen as milestones. The Netflix comedy *Never Have I Ever*, based on creator Mindy Kaling's life, found its lead in 19-year-old Canadian actress Maitreyi Ramakrishnan. She secured her debut acting role by responding to the open casting call Kaling posted on her social media, which expressed a preference for a South Asian American woman to play the 15 to 18-year-old role. But even her teenage love interest, Paxton Hall-Yoshida, is played by 30-year-old actor Darren Barnet. The show has been criticized for casting love interests with such a wide age gap.

In *Never Have I Ever*, Ramakrishnan plays Devi Vishwakumar, a brainy, boy-crazy teenager who struggles against the tension between her strict Indian-American upbringing and being a teenager in California. The show has been lauded for the way it portrays Indian culture and defies stereotypes.

“I think television is part of the many influences teens have, and seeing alternatives to what they may be experiencing can certainly be empowering if they feel constricted to the status quo,” said Stefania Marghitu in an email. Marghitu is the author of the upcoming book *Teen TV* and a professor of film and digital media at Loyola University.

And yet the more negative aspects of teen shows are often the focus of public reaction. In a 2013 issue of the journal *The Moral Panics of Sexuality*, sociologist [Sarah Prior wrote](#) about the panic that ensued after the musical comedy *Glee* turned out to be about a glee club that experiences a sexual awakening. Moral panics, she writes, establish youth sexuality “as inherently dangerous, deviant, and in need of regulation.” Prior describes how the show depicted students who advocated for sexual agency as “sexually aggressive,” which is certainly also seen in *Sex Education*.

This moral conundrum begs the question: How can creators exercise their creative freedom while juggling this moral imperative to be just and educational? For some viewers, the answer is in how the characters responded to these difficult storylines.

In *Sex Education*, for example, Otis is a high school outcast who acts as a de-facto sex therapist and educator for his classmates. The raunchy comedy audaciously shows teen sexuality in a wide range of ways—from its portrayal of diverse sexualities to a character who writes NSFW alien fanfiction—to show just how badly teens need proper sex education. It dares to say the quiet part out loud: teens will continue to have sex whether or not adults talk to them about it.

According to Dr. Tanya Bass, a professor of human sexuality at North Carolina Central University, the best part of *Sex Education* is not the advice or the humor, but rather the healthy communication depicted between teens and their parents. “Even using protection and having communication can increase when they have a trusted adult that they can talk to,” she said.

For Bass, the “helicopter parenting” Julian wrote about in *The Atlantic* doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing. “I think that can be a very positive thing, because we want parents and young people to have conversations about sex and sexuality,” Dr. Bass said. “People are making decisions about their engagement with sex based on these positive relationships.”

Anastasia, an 18-year-old freshman at Hunter College, also said that the intergenerational communication in *Sex Education* can be very beneficial for people her age. Anastasia, who asked to go by her first name for privacy reasons, described feeling socially hindered after spending her entire senior year at her Catholic high school entirely from home. She explained how her parents’ overprotectiveness has bled into her life as a young adult.

“I think a lot of times when it comes to adults worrying about their children, they’re talking to other adults about their concerns and not talking to their children about it, so it’s really hard for both ends to form any type of relationship,” she said.

Dating and sexuality has changed so much for teens over the years but television shows with teen characters seem to stick to the same narratives and bad practices, even as consumers have voiced that they want more from show creators.

Nonetheless, teen television shows seem to be on the precipice of a transformation as the lines between teen and adult content become increasingly blurred. When I spoke to Emma and her friends in Union Square, I asked whether adults should be concerned about how teens are portrayed in the media. Emma responded, “Even we’re concerned about how they act.”