



# **LEWD BY EXAMPLE: ADULTS TALKING ABOUT SEX IN FRONT OF KIDS ON PRIME-TIME BROADCAST NETWORK “FAMILY COMEDIES”**

September 2018



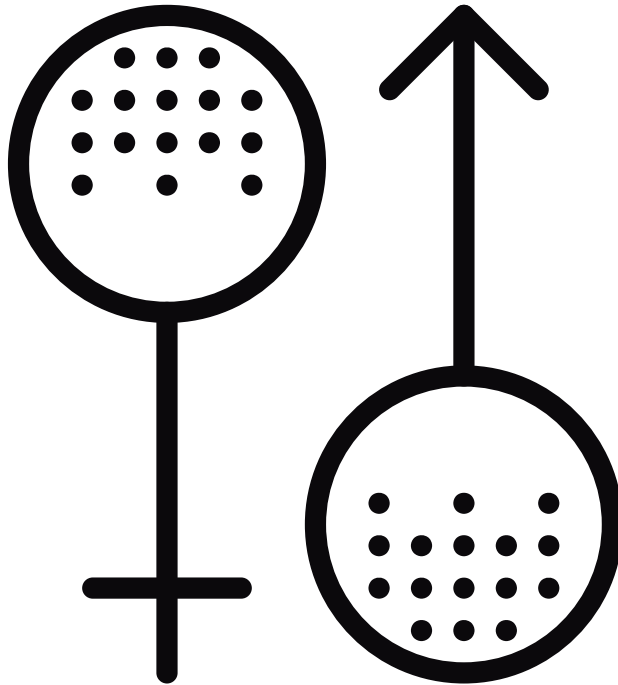
## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prime-time broadcast network “family comedies” are increasingly relying on characters discussing sexual content.

A recent trend has been adult characters (parents and teachers) making explicit references to sex in front of teenage and even child characters.

## THIS STUDY FOUND

- Over 80% (81.5%) of all prime-time broadcast network “family comedies” analyzed for this study contained instances of adults using explicit sexual dialogue in front of children.
- ALL the Fox and NBC “family comedies” reviewed in this study contained instances of adults using sexual dialogue in front of children.
- On the Disney-owned ABC network, 75% of “family comedies” contained such dialogue.
- On CBS, more than half (60%) of “family comedies” did.
- All of CBS’ “family comedies” were rated TV-PG; 83% included a “D” descriptor designating sexual dialogue.
- On ABC, 80% of the network’s “family comedies” containing sex talk in front of kids were rated TV-PG, and over half of them (60%) lacked the “D” descriptor designating sexual dialogue.
- Fox and NBC were more responsible about rating content appropriately: on NBC, 68% of “family comedies” were rated TV-14, and 85% had the “D” descriptor; and 75% of Fox “family comedies” were rated TV-14 and contained a “D” descriptor.
- NBC’s *A.P. Bio* contained the most instances of adult sexual dialogue in front of children. Next worst, in order, were: *The Mick* (Fox), *American Housewife* (ABC), *Life in Pieces* (CBS), and *Family Guy* (Fox).



TV discussions of sex have been scientifically proven to influence teens in their own sexual behavior. At a time when Hollywood is increasingly conscious of the harm done by crude, sexually harassing language used in front of women, and is taking steps to reduce or eliminate it, it is tragic that the entertainment industry remains oblivious to the effect of sexualizing talk in front of children – both child actors, and child viewers at home.

The Parents Television Council calls on Congress and the Federal Communications Commission to ensure that the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board (the agency charged with overseeing the TV content ratings system) fulfills its regulatory mandate, and ensure TV content ratings are accurate, consistent, transparent, and publicly accountable; and we call on the broadcast networks to consider their public interest obligations and return to airing programming safe and suitable for children and teens at times they are likely to be in the viewing audience.

## INTRODUCTION

Over 80% (81.5%) of all prime-time broadcast network “family comedies” analyzed for this study contained instances of adults using explicit sexual dialogue in front of children. Child viewers of supposed “family comedies” are routinely exposed to dialogue and scenarios like:



***The Mick*, Fox**  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**November 21, 2017**

Adult Jimmy and eight-year-old Ben play a poker video game at a bar. Ben's game shows a woman wearing a bra. As he plays, more of the woman becomes uncovered.

Ben: “I can see her booby.”

Jimmy: “I feel like you're a bit too young for this game. but the damage is already done. Let's see if we can get this other nipple.”

Jimmy's girlfriend Mickey approaches.

Jimmy: “Got any quarters? Ben's a jack away from uncovering the vagina.”



# THE MICK



*A.P. Bio*, NBC  
TV-14 DL  
February 1, 2018

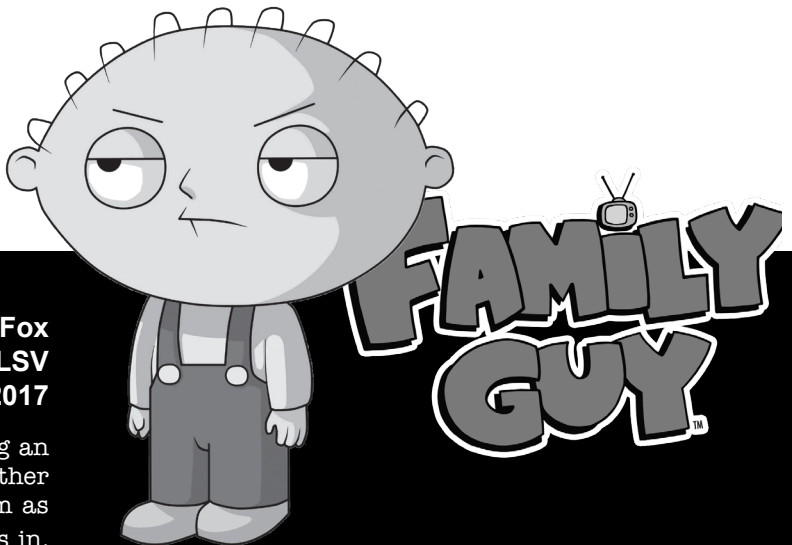
**A.P. BIO**

High school teacher Jack enters the classroom with a black eye, and speaks to his teen students:

Jack: "So, last night I found out my nemesis Miles got a MacArthur genius grant, just after my ex turned me down for sex. So, I got angry, I got very drunk, and then I went pee pee on the hospital where she works. Police officer suggested that I stop. I suggested that he pleasure me sexually. He didn't."

*Family Guy*, Fox  
TV-14 DLSV  
May 21, 2017

Teenager Chris is dating an older woman. His mother Lois advises him as Baby Stewie chimes in.



Lois: "Are you sure you want to date a girl whose had so much experience?"

Chris: "What do you mean?"

Lois: "Like maybe she's got some city miles on her hoo-hoo."

Stewie: "Not to mention a couple of blowouts."

Lois: "I just want to make sure you're not getting in over your head."

Stewie: "Oh, I'm sure someone's already been in there deeper than that, Lois."

This new study is built on the foundation of a 2016 Parents Television Council study, *Trash-Talking Teens: Underage Characters' Use of Sex Talk and Profanity on Broadcast Network TV*, which found that the broadcast networks were creating and airing programs in which teenage and even child characters use overtly sexualized and adult language.

With the abundance of sexual dialogue in prime-time comedy programs has come an increasing reliance by writers on characters discussing sexual content in the presence of teenage or child characters, presumably for purposes of shock or humor. Particularly troubling are scenes of adult characters using sexual dialogue when teen and child characters are present – which is even occurring on so-called “family comedies,” comedy-themed programs about families and which are marketed to audiences as appropriate for real families to view together.

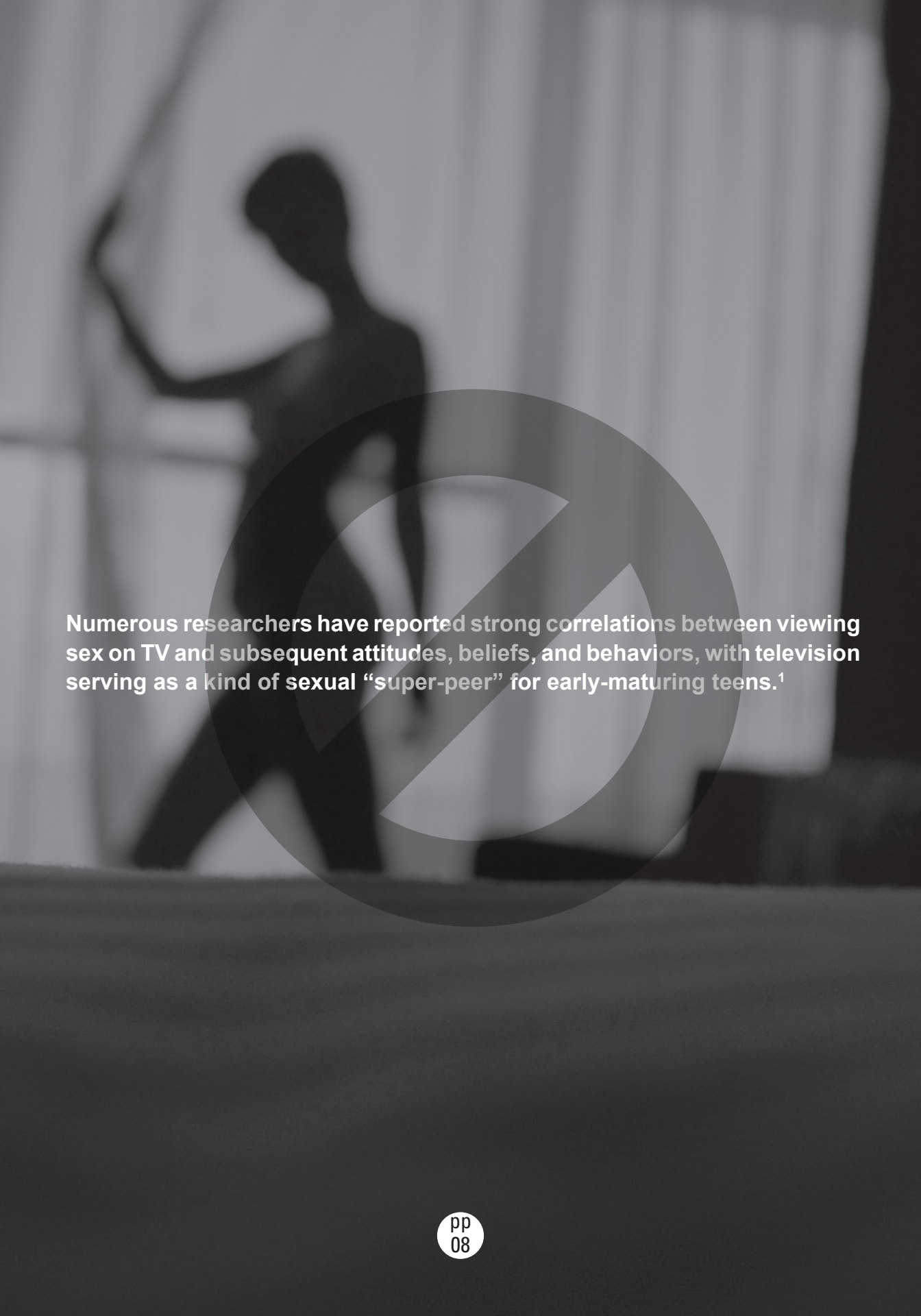
Because TV depictions of sex have been scientifically proven to influence teens in their own sexual behavior, making teens and children the focus of sexual dialogue by adults is potentially harmful and should be of concern to parents.

Since 1987, there has been a growing body of scientific research on the impact of sexualized media images and dialogue on children. Numerous researchers have reported strong correlations between viewing sex on TV and subsequent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, with television serving as a kind of sexual “super-peer” for early-maturing teens.<sup>1</sup>

A 2004 study from the Rand Corporation found that television programs in which characters talk about sex affects teens just as much as programs which actually show sexual activity.<sup>2</sup> The same study also found that teens who watch a large amount of television with sexual content are more likely to initiate sexual intercourse in the follow year.

And in 2010, an American Psychological Association taskforce concluded that the sexualization of girls in the media is a “serious societal problem;” and the consequences for teenage boys are no less grave. Anecdotal evidence also demonstrates the negative and harmful effects which early viewing of sexualized television content can have.<sup>3</sup>

This study evaluated prime-time broadcast network programming for instances in which parents and other adults talk about sex to teenage and child characters. Additionally, all of the content on prime-time broadcast TV which depicts adults using sexualized dialogue in front of teens and children is rated as appropriate for children. Typically, such dialogue occurs in a humorous context on family-themed situation comedies; and such “family comedies” are often rated TV-PG; and even those rated TV-14 are still being rated as appropriate for teenagers by the networks. Often, such episodes lack the “D” descriptor designating sexual dialogue. Thus, teens and even younger children are being exposed to age-inappropriate sexualized dialogue, when in fact the presence of such content should warrant a higher age-based rating; and the fact that such sexual dialogue is spoken by adult characters gives an imprimatur of adult approval for children being exposed to sexual dialogue and behavior. This raises serious concerns about the content being marketed to and rated as appropriate for children.



Numerous researchers have reported strong correlations between viewing sex on TV and subsequent attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors, with television serving as a kind of sexual “super-peer” for early-maturing teens.<sup>1</sup>

# METHODOLOGY

Prime-time broadcast network programs on the five major networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, Fox, and the CW) were digitally recorded. Using the Parents Television Council's proprietary Entertainment Tracking System software, PTC analysts documented and analyzed each instance of adults using sexual dialogue during family-themed prime-time broadcast network programming in which children play a significant role, during the 2016-2017 and 2017-2018 season "sweeps" periods (November 2016, February 2017, May 2017 and November 2017, February 2018, May 2018). Surveyed were a total of 332 episodes of family-themed situation comedies, for 184 hours of programming. A complete list of programs surveyed is given below.

## PROGRAMS SURVEYED

Prime-time broadcast network situation comedies  
("sitcoms") analyzed for the study included:



- *Last Man Standing*
- *Dr. Ken*
- *The Middle*
- *American Housewife*
- *Fresh Off the Boat*
- *The Real O'Neals*
- *The Goldbergs*
- *Speechless*
- *Modern Family*
- *Black-ish*
- *Splitting Up Together*
- *Roseanne*



- *Man With a Plan*
- *Kevin Can Wait*
- *Life in Pieces*
- *Mom*
- *Young Sheldon*



- *The Simpsons*
- *Bob's Burgers*
- *Family Guy*
- *Son of Zorn*
- *The Mick*
- *L.A. to Vegas*



- *This Is Us*
- *Champions*
- *A.P. Bio*



- *Jane the Virgin*



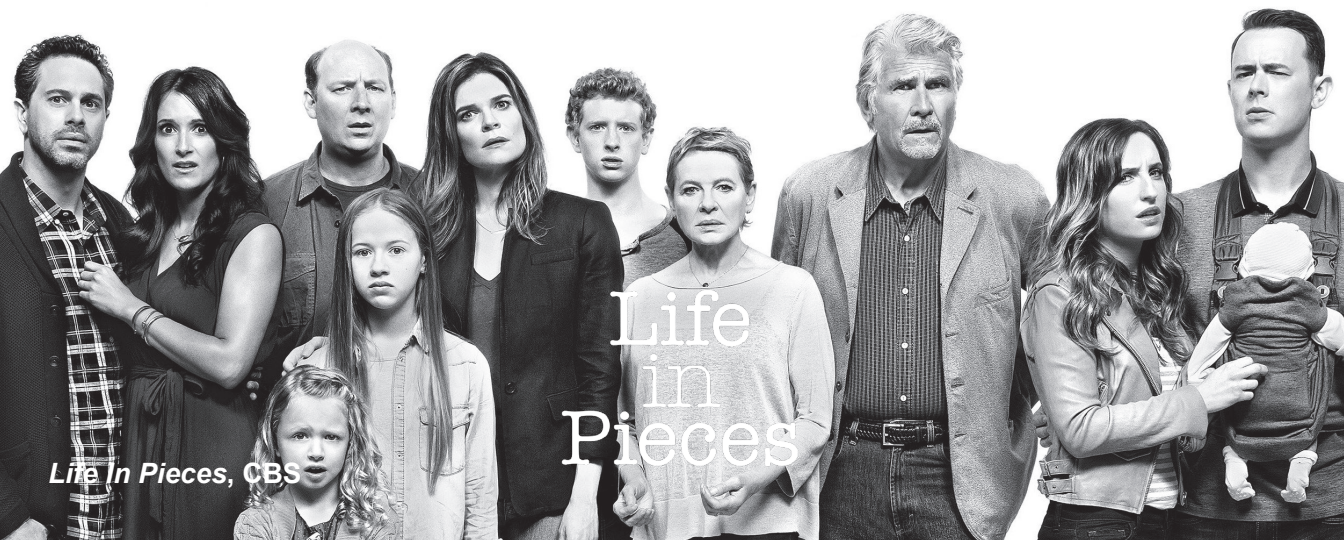
## MAJOR FINDINGS

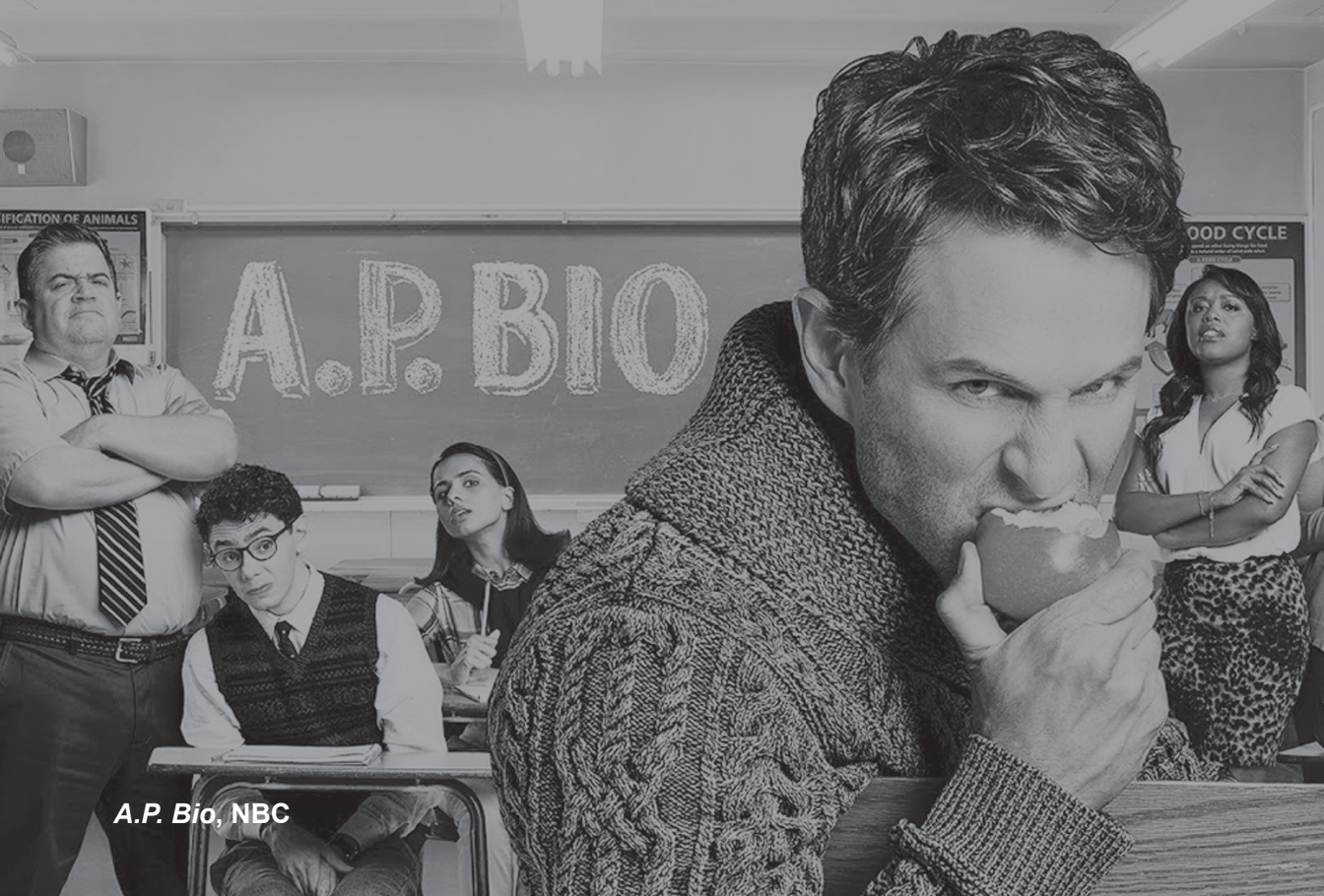
Over 80% (81.5%) of prime-time broadcast network “family comedies” analyzed for this study contained instances of adults using explicit sexual dialogue in front of children. ALL of the “family comedies” aired on CBS, NBC, and Fox contained instances of sexual dialogue by adults in the presence of children, and 80% of ABC’s “family comedies” did. However, ABC had the most individual *instances* of such content. This is largely due to the fact that ABC’s schedule contains many more family-themed comedies than other networks. The network with the second most instances was Fox. NBC was a close third, with nearly all its instances from the Spring 2018 series *A.P. Bio*. CBS had fewer instances of adult/child sexual dialogue, and CW was negligible, due to the near-absence of family comedies from their schedules.

In terms of content ratings, all of CBS’ “family comedies” were rated TV-PG, though 83% did include a “D” descriptor. On ABC, 80% of the network’s “family comedies” containing sex talk in front of kids were rated TV-PG, and over half of them (60%) lacked the “D” descriptor designating sexual dialogue. Fox and NBC were more responsible with their content ratings: on NBC, 68% of “family comedies” were rated TV-14, and 85% had the “D” descriptor; and 75% of Fox “family comedies” were rated TV-14 and contained a “D” descriptor.

The programs containing the most instances of adult sexual dialogue in front of children were *A.P. Bio* (NBC), *The Mick* (Fox), *American Housewife* (ABC), *Life in Pieces* (CBS), and *Family Guy* (Fox). While the two Fox programs were consistently rated TV-14 DLSV, 100% of the episodes of CBS’ *Life in Pieces* were rated TV-PG D, and 75% of ABC’s *American Housewife* were.

The most troubling example in this study is NBC’s *A.P. Bio*. In it, a disgruntled Harvard graduate student is reduced to finding work as a high school teacher. Nearly every episode features multiple scenes of the teacher discussing his sex life, or using other sexual dialogue totally inappropriate for children, in front of his classroom of teenagers.





*A.P. Bio*, NBC

Notably, like Fox's *The Mick*, *A.P. Bio* stars one of the actors and co-creators from the FX cable network's TV-MA rated comedy *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, a program awash in graphic sexual content. Also like *The Mick*, *A.P. Bio* derives its "humor" from putting a selfish, sexually-obsessed adult in a position of mentorship or authority over children, and then exploiting that position to expose the children to adult content, especially sexual dialogue.

What makes this program the most troubling is that, despite premiering only in February 2018, and thus being in only two of the "sweeps" periods covered by this study, *A.P. Bio* still surpassed the number of incidents of adult language used in front of children in *The Mick*, which premiered in January 2017, and aired during five of the six "sweeps" periods the study analyzed. This demonstrates a clear trend: the increasing reliance of shows like *A.P. Bio* and *The Mick* on sexual dialogue and situations in front of children will only increase the number of programs which include such scenarios. The likelihood of this is underlined by the fact that *A.P. Bio* has already been renewed for a second season, thus setting a clear precedent for fall 2018 shows.

Surveyed were a total of 332 episodes of family-themed situation comedies, for 184 hours of programming. Found were 89 instances of adults using sexual dialogue or engaging in discussions of sexual matters in front of children. This roughly equals one such incident every 2 hours of programming, or every 3.7 episodes.

# CONTENT EXAMPLES



**Rated TV-14**  
***The Mick*, Fox, TV-14 DLSV**  
**November 21, 2017**

Jimmy and little Ben play a poker video game at a bar. Ben's game shows a woman wearing a bra. As he plays, more of the woman becomes uncovered.

**Ben [CHILD]:** "I can see her booby."

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "I feel like you're a bit too young for this game. but the damage is already done. Let's see if we can get this other nipple."  
Mickey approaches.

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "Got any quarters? Ben's a jack away from uncovering the vagina."



***A.P. Bio*, NBC**  
**TV-14 DL**  
**February 1, 2018**

High school teacher Jack enters the classroom with a black eye, and speaks to his teen students:

**Jack [ADULT]:** "So, last night I found out my nemesis Miles got a MacArthur genius grant, just after my ex turned me down for sex. So, I got angry, I got very drunk, and then I went pee pee on the hospital where she works. Police officer suggested that I stop. I suggested that he pleasure me sexually. He didn't."



***Family Guy*, Fox**  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**May 21, 2017**

Teenager Chris is dating an older woman. His mother Lois advises him.

**Lois [ADULT]:** "Are you sure you want to date a girl whose had so much experience?"

**Chris [TEEN]:** "What do you mean?"

**Lois [ADULT]:** "Like maybe she's got some city miles on her hoo-hoo."

**Stewie [CHILD]:** "Not to mention a couple of blowouts."

**Lois [ADULT]:** "I just want to make sure you're not getting in over your head."

**Stewie [CHILD]:** "Oh, I'm sure someone's already been in there deeper than that, Lois."



***Family Guy, Fox***  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**April 30, 2017**

High school principal Shepherd talks with teenager Meg.

**Shepherd [ADULT]:** "I just listened to two hours of butt-dialed sex between my wife and the ADT alarm guy."

**Meg [TEEN]:** "Why didn't you just hang up?"

**Shepherd [ADULT]:** "Because I miss the sound of her voice."

**School secretary [ADULT]:** "Principal Shepherd, your wife is on the line. She says, 'Uh, uh, oh God, HARDER!'"



***The Mick, Fox***  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**November 14, 2017**

Mickey and the kids go to great-grandmother Rita's 100th birthday celebration. Mickey discovers Rita is a lesbian when she gropes and attempts to bed Mickey. Mickey talks to the kids.

**Mickey [ADULT]:** "Your great-grandmother tried to bone me. I had to sleep in my car just to get away from her....I woke up with a 100 year old boob in my face. That woman is a sexual predator. I'm supposed to have dinner with her tonight -- a dinner I can only assume comes with a whole lot of expectations."

**Chip [TEEN]:** "Okay, so some grand old dame wants to get in your pants. I'm certain you've debased yourself in worse ways."



***The Mick, Fox***  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**November 14, 2017**

Mickey's boyfriend Jimmy walks into a bedroom room and finds teenage Sabrina dripping melted candle wax onto the chest of her great-grandmother's adult butler Richard. The butler's wrists are tied to the foot of the bed and he is only wearing his underwear.

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "Oh, this is great. [Mickey's] having sex with that old bird, and you're banging the butler."

**Sabrina [TEEN]:** "Ewww, gross! I'm not banging him!"

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "What are you doing?"

**Sabrina [TEEN]:** "You know. Just slapping him around and burning him up a bit."

# CONTENT EXAMPLES



***A.P. Bio, NBC***  
**TV-14 DL**  
**February 25, 2018**

Principal Durbin's secretary Helen gives the A.P. Bio students a class in sex education.

**Helen [ADULT]:** "Pull out method - don't work. 'Menopause' - not real. 'Vaginal orgasm' - give me a break!" She holds up an X-ray up to her crotch.

**Helen [ADULT]:** "This is my cervix." Helen has a student, Anthony, point out parts on her body, including her crotch.



***Family Guy, Fox***  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**April 30, 2017**

Peter has replaced Shepherd as high school principal.

**Peter [ADULT]:** "Students, this is a chair without a seat. Jeff Banfield, come down here, take your pants off, and sit."

Teenage student Jeff walks over to Peter and takes off his pants, exposing his naked rear.

**School Board Member [ADULT]:** "What is going on here?"

**Peter [ADULT]:** "Just a little of the three Rs: reading, writing, and the wrecking of this guy's sack."

**Shepherd [ADULT]:** "I went on a sex trip to Thailand and I banged all the goofy right out of me."



***A.P. Bio, NBC***  
**TV-14 DL**  
**February 1, 2018**

New teacher Jack talks to his high school Advanced Placement Biology students.

**Jack [ADULT]:** "I'm going to have sex with as many women as I possibly can throughout the entire state of California."

Jack reads his class lecture notes.

**Jack [ADULT]:** "Mentally breaking my nemesis...sex with everyone in California...no, that was it."



**A.P. Bio, NBC**  
**TV-14 DL**  
**February 1, 2018**

Jack has ordered his students to “catfish” his old nemesis from Harvard, by creating fake internet identities and trying to seduce him. A female student reads her “catfish” message for Jack:

**Girl [TEEN]:** “Hey boy, you’re smooth like butter dripping off of chocolate. Gonna lick you up and down. Drip, slurp, yum, gimme that sweet wet sugar mess.”



**Son of Zorn, Fox**  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**February 19, 2017**

Alien fantasy-world barbarian Zorn talks to his normal human son Alan.

**Zorn [ADULT]:** “Hey Alangulon, if you’re going to got to prom you’re probably going to have sex, right? So we should maybe have a little chitchat about the birds and the bees.”

**Alan [TEEN]:** “Dad, you know, I have health class and the internet. So...”

**Zorn [ADULT]:** “I just don’t want you to become a teen dad. You know, there’s nothing more tragic...I never talked to you about the birds and the bees and your two penises. I mean, I don’t know if you have an up-y down-y or a side by side.”



**Son of Zorn, Fox**  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**February 19, 2017**

Due to the alien fantasy-world genes inherited from Zorn, Alan has become pregnant.

**Alan [TEEN]:** “Evidently, I am pregnant.”

**Edie [ADULT]:** “You’re pregnant?”

**Zorn [ADULT]:** “Get out of my house, you whore!”

**Alan [TEEN]:** “Look, I’m just gonna tell you what Dr. Klorpins said. This thing on my shoulder is just an ingrown hair. And I’m pregnant.”

**Edie [ADULT]:** “You’re 17. You didn’t use protection? What were you thinking?”

**Zorn [ADULT]:** “Yeah. Alangulon, what the hell? You have shamed this family for the last time!”

**Linda [ADULT]:** “I’m sorry, could someone please explain what’s happening here to the one person that doesn’t know what the hell is going on?”

**Zorn [ADULT]:** “Well Linda, it’s simple. When a Zephyrian man loves a woman, sometimes one of the man’s penises sucks a woman’s egg out of her uterus into the man’s he-womb where it is fertilized, and then grows inside the man until it’s big enough to bite it’s way out of the man’s lower back. And then birds and bees swarm the mess left on the ground.”

## CONTENT EXAMPLES



*Family Guy*, Fox

TV-14 DLSV

April 30, 2017

Brian and Baby Stewie open a bed & breakfast, but it turns into a brothel.

**Brian [ADULT]:** “Stewie, we have a problem. The only people checking in are here to have sex with prostitutes.”

**Stewie [CHILD]:** “Well then, why are they all signing the guest book and writing quaint things like, ‘Railed Crystal good’?”

**Brian [ADULT]:** “Damn it, this is awful.”

**Stewie [CHILD]:** “Hey Brian, what’s a splat job?”

**Brian [ADULT]:** “I don’t know, Stewie. I’m worried that you’re seeing too much.”



*A.P. Bio*, NBC

TV-14 DL

May 3, 2018

Jack talks to the class about his “nemesis” Miles.

**Jack [ADULT]:** “Miles is leaving his post at Stanford, and I am to assume my rightful perch atop the philosophy department... where my intellect will be worshiped by students that don’t dry hump their pillows every night.”



*A.P. Bio*, NBC

TV-14 DL

February 1, 2018

Jack talks to Principal Durbin with his student Devin present.

**Jack [ADULT]:** “I don’t have kids. I’ve always been pretty good about using condoms, even though I hate the damn things. Can’t feel as much.”



***The Mick*, Fox**  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**February 27, 2018**

Jimmy speaks to teenage Sabrina.

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "Sabrina, you're like my daughter. I could watch you have sex, and I wouldn't feel a thing."



***Black-ish*, ABC**  
**TV-14 L**  
**February 22, 2017**

Bow lets her kids swear since they are more open with her that way, but soon regrets the decision.

**Junior [TEEN]:** "I was going to tell you I'm going to Seth's house, but I'm really going to Megan's to fool around. Don't worry, top stuff only."

**Zoey [TEEN]:** "What the [bleeped f\*\*\*], Mom?"

**Bow [ADULT]:** "Okay this honesty is way too much. Half an hour ago, Junior told me why he goes through so much lotion. I don't want to know my children this well."



***Black-ish*, ABC**  
**TV-14 L**  
**May 1, 2018**

Dre and the other children looks at his son's sonogram during Bow's pregnancy.

**Dre [ADULT]:** "Look at his penis. That boy is packing heat!"



***The Mick*, Fox**  
**TV-14 DLSV**  
**November 21, 2017**

Jimmy tells little Ben how his accident affected his baseball career.

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "A pitcher's ass is like a nuclear reactor. It's the power center. Everything flows through it."

**Ben [CHILD]:** "I thought pitchers use their arms."

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "No, that's a common misconception. All pitching comes directly through the ass."

**Ben [CHILD]:** "That's awesome! You must have had a really nice butt."

**Jimmy [ADULT]:** "Yeah, it looked like a Clydesdale."

## CONTENT EXAMPLES

## Rated TV-PG



***American Housewife, ABC***

**TV-PG DL**

**May 9, 2018**

Katie and Taylor squabble in front of actor Nathan Fillion.

**Katie [ADULT]:** “Look who’s suddenly concerned with what shouldn’t go in where! Listen, I’ve got to be a parent if I don’t want to be a grandparent.”

**Taylor [TEEN]:** “Getting a motel room after prom doesn’t mean that’s going to happen. And besides, who are you to talk? You are the biggest hypocrite, Miss Prom Dress With the Broken Zipper.”

**Nathan Fillion [ADULT]:** “In today’s day and age, I don’t sign boobs anymore.”

**Taylor [TEEN]** “My mom couldn’t get out of her dress fast enough, yet when I want to get a motel room with my boyfriend she’s all, Oh! Oh my!”

**Nathan Fillion [ADULT]:** “On *Castle*, Becket and I went till the end of season four before we finally hooked up. It was all about the wait.”

**Taylor [TEEN]** “But I didn’t even say I was going to do anything! I don’t even know if Trip is ready.”

**Nathan Fillion [ADULT]:** “How do you know if you’re ready?”

**Katie [ADULT]:** “Yeah, how do you know if you’re ready?”

**Taylor [TEEN] :** “I don’t.”



***Life in Pieces, CBS***

**TV-PG DL**

**May 17, 2018**

Samantha doesn’t know about her surprise birthday party. She leans in to kiss Ryan after they enter the dark house, where her family is waiting.

**Samantha [TEEN] (to Ryan [TEEN]):** “I want you to be my first.”

**Heather [ADULT]:** “Samantha!”

**Sophia [CHILD]:** “Her first what?”



***American Housewife, ABC***

**TV-PG DL**

**May 9, 2018**

Katie learns Taylor and Trip have reserved a motel room for after prom.

**Katie [ADULT]:** “Wake up! Trip’s only after one thing.”

**Taylor [TEEN]:** “Mom, I made the motel reservation. I’m only after one thing.”



***The Goldbergs*, ABC**

**TV-PG L**

**May 9, 2018**

After seeing the movie *Spaceballs*, Adam dreams that he meets Dark Helmet.

**Dark Helmet [ADULT]:** "Oh, I see your Schwartz has grown."

**Adam [TEEN]:** "Yeah, I'm in high school now."

**Dark Helmet [ADULT]:** "I was a late bloomer, too."



***Life in Pieces*, CBS**

**TV-PG DL**

**February 23, 2017**

John prepares to read his vows to Joan in front of the family during their makeshift wedding.

**John [ADULT]:** "What if I said, 'Joanie, Joanie, ride her like a pony?'"



***Life in Pieces*, CBS**

**TV-PG DL**

**May 17, 2018**

Parents Tim and Heather talk with teen Samantha in her bedroom.

**Tim [ADULT]:** "We're trying to keep her a virgin."

He picks up a plastic egg.

**Tim [ADULT]:** "What's this, some kind of weird sex toy?"



***A.P. Bio*, NBC**

**TV-PG L**

**March 1, 2018**

Jack boasts of his sexual experience to the class.

**Jack [ADULT]:** "Have any of you slept with 24 women?"

# CONCLUSION

In today's world, children and teens are bombarded by media content, much of it generated by the broadcast networks. Children are influenced by what they see and hear on television. According to a national consumer opinion poll conducted by the Dove Foundation, 94% of parents believe that offensive material in television and other media is on the rise.<sup>4</sup> Seeing and hearing sexual dialogue on television affects children just as much as seeing actual sexual activity on TV, and teens who watch a large amount of television with sexual content are more likely to engage in sexual activity themselves.<sup>5</sup>

This study only analyzed programming during "sweeps" periods for the last three years; yet the PTC has also documented many examples of sexual dialogue on selected prime-time broadcast programs which occurred outside "sweeps." It is important to note, therefore, that there is far more adult sexual dialogue taking place before child characters on TV and that child and teen viewers are exposed to such language more frequently than is reflected in this study.

Also of concern is the fact that such programs are inaccurately rated, with some of the most explicit dialogue airing of programs which have been rated TV-PG. The broadcast networks defend their use of graphic dialogue and situation by claiming that the V-Chip is a universal panacea for viewers.

But when programming which depicts children being exposed to explicit sexual dialogue is rated TV-PG (appropriate for children under 14), the V-chip is inadequate to protect children.

This is because, to function properly, the V-Chip requires that programs be rated accurately, consistently, and impartially. But they're not...because the entertainment industry itself controls the ratings system.

Supposedly, the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board represents the interests of parents, and ensures the networks rate their shows appropriately, in a manner which helps parents protect their children. In fact, the TVOMB is a closed group, made up of representatives of the National Association of Broadcasters, the National Cable and Telecommunications Association, the Motion Picture Association of America, and various broadcast and cable networks and other media corporations...each appointed by the TVOMB's own members. The body charged with monitoring the ratings system is made up of those it is supposed to be monitoring. Under the current system, the same people who create TV content then rate the content they've created, and also run the board that supervises the rating process.



Vchip



This study proves the need for systemic reform of the TVOMB and the TV content ratings system. Both should be accurate, consistent, transparent, and accountable to the public. Some measures that could be adopted to make it so are:

- Networks should clearly state the criteria by which they assign ratings.
- Ratings should reflect content from a parent's perspective, not a TV network's perspective.
- There should be clear and meaningful distinction between programs rated TV-PG and those rated TV-14.
- The TV-MA rating should be used where appropriate. (Currently, no broadcast television program uses this "mature audiences" rating.)
- Ratings for similar television program content should be consistent within each network, consistent across all networks, and consistent across all distribution platforms.
- If changes in ratings standards are made, the public must be informed of the change, and [for example] told why a rating of TV-PG no longer describes the same content it did previously.
- Content descriptors (D,V,S, and L) should be used to inform, not serve as intensifiers of the underlying age rating.
- The TVOMB should provide accurate and current postings of the names of its members, noting how they were chosen, why they were chosen, what their term is, how they can be contacted, and whether there are any conflicts of interest that might interfere with program content being rated accurately.
- The TVOMB should make publicly available basic information about its proceedings, and should open its meetings to the FCC Commissioners, members of Congress, the press, and the public.
- The composition of the TVOMB should reflect a wider cross-section of the American public than a tiny clique of entertainment industry insiders; and the public should have some say in the nomination and election of members.
- The American people should be the ultimate arbiter as to whether the content ratings system and the TV Parental Guidelines Monitoring Board are achieving their stated purpose of protecting children.

\* These are NOT the current Television content ratings.  
They are one proposed way ratings Could be Improved.

THE FOLLOWING  
PROGRAM IS RATED

**TV-MA**  
AND CONTAINS

**AC**

ADULT CONTENT

**AL**

ADULT LANGUAGE

**GV**

GRAPHIC VIOLENCE

**N**

NUDITY

**SS**

SEXUAL SITUATIONS



The TV content ratings system is failing parents and the American public. If the entertainment industry is going to honor its commitment to families, the TV content ratings system must be accurate and consistent, and the ratings process ought to be transparent and accountable to the public, especially to the parents for whom the system was created.

This underlines deeper problems with the TV content ratings system, beyond the fact that there is no impartial, transparent, outside organization answerable to parents which rates television programming. With a clear financial incentive to misrate their own programming (lowered age ratings = more viewers = more advertising revenue), it is little surprise that the networks do so; yet this demonstrates a clear disdain and disregard for the welfare of younger viewers, or for TV stations' Congressionally-mandated public interest obligations. The broadcast networks' fully-owned and affiliated stations hold their licenses to use the public's airwaves under the condition that they operate "in the public interest." But it is difficult to see how airing explicit sexual dialogue at times when young children are in the audience is "in the public interest."

Yet the broadcast networks continue to insert explicit and adult-themed humor and dialogue into PG-rated, prime-time programs about families – programs marketed to families and aired at times when families watch TV.

Programs like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* are one thing; that show airs at 10 p.m., is on the adult-themed FX cable network, has always been rated TV-MA, and isn't sold to viewers as a "family comedy" anyway. But programs containing graphic sexual dialogue – particularly programs deliberately billed as "family comedies," and implicitly appropriate for family, teen, and child viewing – should not be rated TV-PG. Yet, the broadcast networks have decided that dialogue and situations appropriate for a TV-MA cable comedy are also suitable for the public airwaves, at times when children are in the audience...and have rated such programs the same as movies like *Cinderella*.



At a time when the #metoo and #timesup movements have arisen, seeking to create a safe environment for women, free from sexual harassment and vulgar sex talk, television is teaching teenagers and even children that such dialogue is acceptable in the wider society. Further, Hollywood now claims it is concerned about protecting adult women from such language -- but shows no concern about exposing vulnerable children to sexualization and vulgar sex talk.

The issues raised in this study of prime-time broadcast “family comedies” merely scratch the surface of a much wider problem. With all their faults, broadcast TV family sitcoms are still about the mildest television content available...but they are the canary in the coal mine. Increasingly, cable, satellite, and streaming services, are aiming ever-more graphic programming at younger and younger audiences...with many of these programs marketed and rated as appropriate for teenagers or even children.

The PTC calls on the broadcast networks to reevaluate the content in programs intended for “family” audiences airing in prime time, and to rate such programs accurately. We also urge corporate sponsors of prime-time broadcast television to consider whether their brands should be associated with programs which, increasingly, are exposing vulnerable teens and young children to dialogue and situations appropriate only for adults.

Once, prime time broadcast TV was a haven for millions of families, adults and children alike; but in their desire to compete with graphic cable and streaming programming, the broadcast networks are exiling the youngest viewers – the future 18-34 demographic – from broadcast TV. Today, families and children are suffering the results of this short-sighted policy; but the networks themselves may have cause to regret it tomorrow.

# ENDNOTES

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