



TRASH-TALKING TEENS:

UNDERAGE CHARACTERS' USE OF SEX TALK AND PROFANITY ON BROADCAST NETWORK TV

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Audiences have become accustomed to hearing vulgar and sexually-charged dialogue coming from the mouths of adult characters on television. What they might not expect, is to hear similar language coming from the mouths of minor-aged characters; yet such occurrences are increasingly common.

This is of concern due to the growing body of scientific evidence demonstrating the negative consequences possible for children and teens who consume entertainment containing profanity and sexualized dialogue, and parents' recognition that their children's behavior is influenced by what their children are seeing on television.

In this study, the PTC examined prime-time programming on the four major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) which aired from February through May 2016, and documented each instance of teenage or child characters using profanity or sexualized dialogue. Such dialogue occurred most frequently in a humorous context on family-themed situation comedies which were often rated TV-PG (acceptable for younger teens and children).

In its research, the PTC found:

1. Language used by child and teen-aged characters included: (bleeped) "s**t" and "s**tting," (bleeped) "f**k" and "f**king," "erections," "boobs," "penis," "masturbating," "nymphomaniac," "ass," and more.
2. ABC (owned by Disney) had the largest number of instances of profanity and sexualized language by teens and children, with 81 instances of profanity and 42 instances of sexual dialogue in the study period.



BECAUSE OUR CHILDREN ARE WATCHING

3. **Over the study period, *The Real O'Neals* contained more sexual dialogue involving teen and child characters than any other prime-time program on broadcast television.** In the first three 30-minute episodes alone of ABC's *The Real O'Neals*, there were a total of 30 instances of adult-themed content spoken by teen and child characters. That is equivalent to one instance of adult-themed content spoken by a child every three minutes.
4. **Fox, with its large Sunday-night "Animation Domination" cartoon block, had the second-most programs** containing child and teen characters using profanity (24 instances in the study period) and sexual dialogue (11).
5. **Prime-time programming on CBS and NBC contains relatively few child or teenage characters**, and the instances of profanity and sexual dialogue by those characters was negligible.

In 2015, companies spent \$75.3 billion on TV advertising for the sole purpose of influencing viewer behavior: "Buy our service or product!" During the 2016 election season, candidates are expected to spend \$6 billion on advertising, again, with the sole purpose of influencing viewer behavior: "Vote for me!" Companies that run public service announcements and networks that rally behind social or political causes (Rock the Vote, "The More You Know," etc.) all believe in television's ability to influence behavior in the real world.

Scientific studies suggest that when children see certain behaviors modeled by similarly-aged characters on television, they will perceive those behaviors as normative and acceptable. The results of this study raises serious concerns about the content being marketed to and rated as appropriate for children. The PTC calls on the broadcast networks to stop putting profanity and sexualized dialogue into the mouths of minor-aged characters; and to apply correct and accurate content ratings to programs that employ such language. The broadcast networks can and should freely choose to maintain standards of common decency.



INTRODUCTION

This study, an examination of prime-time broadcast network programming from February through May 2016, demonstrates that the networks are increasingly creating and airing programs in which teenage and even child characters use overtly sexualized and adult language.

Sexual content is of particular concern. Since 1987, there has been a growing body of scientific research on the impact of sexualized media images and dialogue. 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.

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.

Use of profanity is related to aggressive behavior, particularly in youth. This has long been recognized by the academic establishment, where use of profanity is often indicative of problem behavior among school-age children and adolescents. Academic studies have found that use of profanity induces a desensitizing or “numbing” effect on emotional responses.

Additionally, a survey of parents by Common Sense Media found that 9 out of 10 American parents believe today’s media contribute to children using more coarse and vulgar language (90%), experiencing a loss of innocence too early (88%), and behaving in violent or anti-social ways (85%). Survey results also demonstrate that the majority of parents believe that media negatively affect *their own* children in these ways.

Despite these well-documented concerns, profanity in media has increased greatly in recent years. In a 2010 study, the Parents Television Council documented a sharp increase in the use of vulgar language. Use of profanity on prime-time broadcast network TV increased 70% from 2005 to 2010. (To take just one example, use of the bleeped or muted f-word increased from 11 instances total in 2005 to 276 instances in 2010, an increase of 2,409%.)

Sadly, despite the proven science demonstrating the link between media content and harm to children, a vocal opposition to this scientific evidence has developed, with the loudest voices of protest coming from those who produce and profit from explicit media.

A final concern is the fact that much of the content on prime-time broadcast TV which depicts teens and children using profanity and sex talk is rated as being 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 (acceptable for younger teens and children) rather than TV-14 (acceptable for viewers aged 14 and higher). This means that younger children are being exposed to age-inappropriate

levels of profanity and sexual dialogue. This is exacerbated by the networks' practice of using ratings "bugs" like D, L, V, or S to indicate elevated levels of sex, violence, suggestive dialogue or foul language, when in fact the presence of such content should warrant a higher age-based rating.

METHODOLOGY

This study analyzed each episode of programming containing children or teenagers under age 18 as significant characters on the four major broadcast networks (ABC, CBS, NBC, and Fox) which aired from February 1 through May 31, 2016. Thus, the study surveyed programming during the crucial February and May "sweeps" periods, as well as the months of March and April.

This resulted in a survey encompassing a total of 280 episodes and 205.5 hours of programming on the four networks surveyed, broken down as follows:

ABC:	129 episodes	85 hours
CBS:	49 episodes	38.5 hours
NBC:	40 episodes	40 hours
Fox:	62 episodes	42 hours

N.B. The number of hours and number of episodes do not match, because most sitcoms are only half an hour long.

A complete list of programs containing children and teens as significant characters examined in this study is given below.

ABC

Fresh Off the Boat, Black-ish, The Real O'Neals, The Middle, The Goldbergs, Modern Family, Last Man Standing, Dr. Ken, Castle, The Family, American Crime, Once Upon a Time

Fox

Grandfathered, The Grinder, The Simpsons, Bob's Burgers, Family Guy, Bordertown, Gotham, Wayward Pines

NBC

Shades of Blue, You, Me and the Apocalypse, The Mysteries of Laura, Heartbeat, Game of Silence

CBS

Life in Pieces, Madam Secretary, The Good Wife, Blue Bloods, Mom

MAJOR FINDINGS

This study found the following amounts of sexual language and profanity used by child (aged 2-12) and teenage (aged 13-18) characters.

Network	Profanity	Sexual Dialogue
ABC:	81	42
Fox:	24	11
NBC:	3	0
CBS:	1	2

ABC had the largest number of instances of profanity and sexualized language by children. In part, this is because ABC airs the most programs about families, particularly family-themed situation comedies. As a result, its programming contains more child and teen characters. However, while ABC provides the most programming for kids, the Disney-owned network also contains by far the most instances of adult language by kids, and the most sexualized language by children and teens.

Fox, with its large Sunday-night “Animation Domination” cartoon block, has the second-most programs containing child and teen characters using profanity and sexual dialogue. Prime-time programming on CBS and NBC is largely targeted at adults, includes few family-themed programs, and contains relatively few child or teenage characters.





CONTENT EXAMPLES

The following dialogue was delivered by a child:

Language content

Gene: "The bastard."

Louise: "He can go to hell."

Gene: "Bastard!"

(Bob's Burgers, May 15, 2016, Fox, TV-PG L)

Adam: "My brother Barry is a wang tonight."

Barry: "Barry's gonna kick your ass tonight."

(The Goldbergs, February 17, 2016, ABC, TV-PG DL)

Adam flips and body-slams his older brother Barry.

Barry: "What the (bleeped f**k)?"

Adam: "That was badass!"

(The Goldbergs, May 18, 2016, ABC, TV-PG L)

Erica and Barry are in trouble.

Erica: "Son of a bitch!"

Barry: "We are so boned."

(The Goldbergs, May 4, 2016, ABC, TV-PG L)

Eve: "I Googled how to talk out of your ass, but that was no help. By the way, never Google 'How to talk out of your ass.'"

(Last Man Standing, April 15, 2016, ABC, TV-PG)

While playing in a tennis match, Baby Stewie becomes enraged at the judge.
Stewie: "Are you (bleeped s**tting) me? You're gonna penalize us because you're a blind (bleeped f**king) blue jacket (bleeped)? I will drop you to your knees and shove my racket so far down your throat you'll be (bleeped s**tting) my grit for a week. I'm gonna go to your house and (bleeped f**k) your wife!"

(*Family Guy*, April 14, 2016, Fox, TV-14 DLSV)

Sexual Dialogue

Tyler comments on a school prank by teenagers.

Tyler: "They changed 'Freshman Elections' to 'Fleshman Erections.'"

(*Life in Pieces*, CBS, March 10, 2016, TV-14 DL)

Bart: "Nelson's gonna show us his mom's bra."

Milhouse: "That's the thing that boobs touched."

(*The Simpsons*, Fox, May 15, 2016, TV-PG DLV)

Biker Critter discusses carrying his cell phone in his anal cavity.

Gene: "I heard your penis gets stretched out and it's never the same."

(*Bob's Burgers*, April 10, 2016, Fox, TV-PG DL)

Becky and Gert discuss their parents' sex life.

Becky: "It's the one day a year my parents have sex. That is, if my dad's penis can come out of its inverted hole."

Gert: "I wonder if they're going to stop talking about daddy's ding dong."

(*Bordertown*, February 21, 2016, Fox, TV-14 DLSV)

Teenager Chris sits in the living room, covered with a jacket. Underneath it, he is masturbating.

Stewie: "I draped that over him. He was just doing it out in the open."

(*Family Guy*, February 21, 2016, Fox, TV-14 DLSV)

Young boys Luke and Manny give their teenage sister Alex their computer, so she can delete their pornography from it.

Alex: "Just so you know, women are not all vacuous nymphomaniacs looking to seduce every man that crosses their path."

(*Modern Family*, March 2, 2016, ABC, TV-PG L)

THE REAL O'NEALS

ABC's situation comedy *The Real O'Neals*, a half-hour series that debuted on March 2, 2016, contained the most examples of teenage use of sexual dialogue and adult language, both in terms of frequency and explicitness.

Originally airing at 8:30 p.m. ET/PT (only 7:30 p.m. Central/Mountain) on the Disney-owned ABC network, *The Real O'Neals* centered on the growing sexual awareness of 16 year-old Kenny O'Neal, his 18 year-old brother Jimmy, and their 12 year-old sister Shannon. All three siblings were involved in sexual situations, discussed sex-themed topics, and used profanity. Both male characters were involved in stories relating to sex with girls and using pornography, while Shannon received a storyline about beginning her menstrual cycle.

Despite the program's sexual content and language, which many parents would find inappropriate for children, throughout its run *The Real O'Neals* was rated TV-PG (intended for audiences younger than age 14).

The Real O'Neals contained markedly more profanity and sexual content than other family-themed comedies on ABC. In the first three episodes alone, *The Real O'Neals* contained a total of 30 instances of adult-themed content. That is equivalent to one instance every three minutes.

Over the study period, *The Real O'Neals* contained more sexual dialogue involving teen and child characters than any other prime-time program on broadcast television – more, in fact, than ALL other prime-time broadcast network programs put together.

CONTENT EXAMPLES

The following dialogue was delivered by children.

Language content

Jimmy: "Mom, where the hell is the [bleeped f***ing] car?"

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, March 2, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Kenny: "That is some crazy Old Testament [bleeped s***], Mom."

(*The Real O'Neals*, AGC, March 2, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Kenny berates the vice-principal over the school's speech code.

Kenny: "V. P. Murray, this policy is the [bleeped unknown] [bleeped unknown] lamest, [bleeped unknown] ass tickling, [bleeped unknown] sucking thing I've ever heard."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, March 15, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Shannon: "You bet your ass they were."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, May 3, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Kenny: "I tried it, but being a badass doesn't fit me after all...They're gonna saran-wrap your balls to your face."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, May 3, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Kenny: "Shut the (bleeped f**k) up!"

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, May 10, 2016, TV-PG L)

Sexual Dialogue

Mimi: "We've been dating for six months and you've never once pressured me to have sex. Which is why I want to have sex."

Mimi hands Kenny a large box of condoms.

Kenny: "Wow. 48 condoms!"

Mimi: "Twelve didn't seem like enough."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, March 2, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Jimmy: "What did Mimi do to you?"

Kenny: "Oh. Just -- you know, just...all that sex stuff that drives us wild."

Jimmy: "No matter what she [Mom] tells you, you're not going to Hell. Trust me. If everything she said was true, I would be so blind by now."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, March 2, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Kenny grabs Mimi's breast and immediately pulls his hand away.

Kenny: "Your boobs feel squishy."



Mimi: "Do you really want to go your whole life without knowing what it's like? Shouldn't you have something to compare everything else to?...Just try Mimi's papaya. I know you'll like it."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, March 2, 2016, TV-PG DL)

Kenny and Jimmy look at pornography on their computer.

Kenny: "I just wanted to see nice men doing normal gay stuff."

Jimmy: "Yeah, me too. To be supportive. I'm trying to be supportive."

Kenny clicks on a video. Multiple windows to other porn sites open up.

Jimmy: "Dude, it's a pornado."

Kenny: "So many close-ups. And that one's straight porn."

Jimmy: "Don't leave me with all the butts in my face."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, March 15, 2016, TV-PG DL)

A girl asks Kenny what it's like to be gay.

girl: "When you're hooking up, what's second base? 'Cause for us it's boobs. What's the gay version of boobs?"

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, April 19, 2016, TV-PG D)

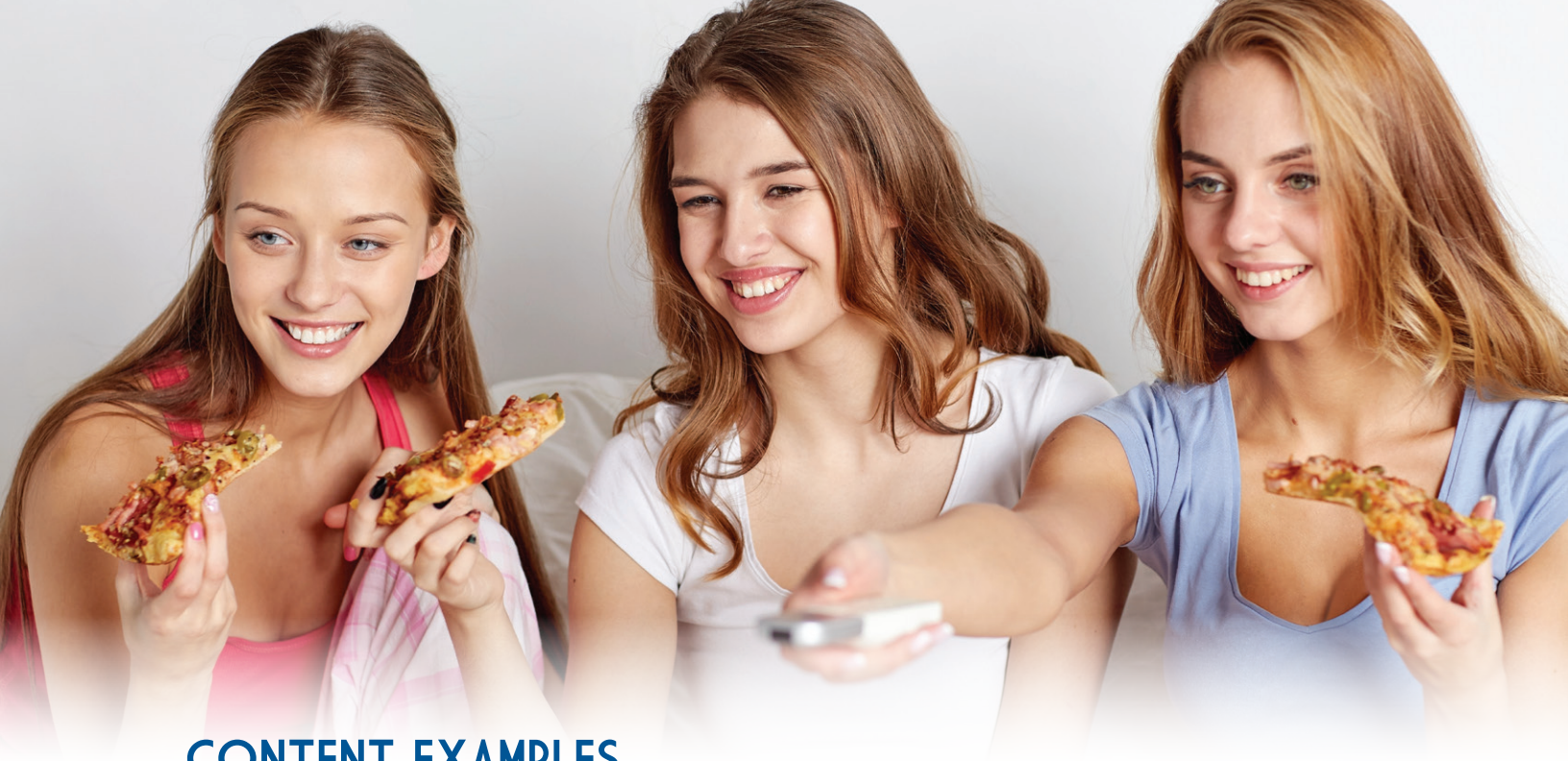
Shannon: "Prom is so over-hyped. It's for amateurs, like Valentine's Day and New Year's. The most romantic life of your night could happen in a random parking lot on a Tuesday night."

(*The Real O'Neals*, ABC, May 24, 2016, TV-PG DLV)

American Crime

The ABC series *American Crime* also contained teenagers engaging in graphic language and explicit sexual talk. *American Crime* is a serious drama which explores questions of date rape, gender questioning, and sexual harassment in teen culture. The serious nature of the program is underlined by the timeslot in which ABC chose to air it (10:00 p.m. ET, the last hour of prime time), and by the network's decision to consistently rate *American Crime* TV-14. The episode about a rape trial, which contained explicit discussions of sexual text messages and sexual assault, was rated TV-14 DLSV, the strongest rating currently used on broadcast TV -- though not the strongest available, which is TV-MA.

While distinctions can and should be made between dramas addressing serious topics and light-hearted family entertainment, the fact remains that *American Crime* was rated as appropriate for teens. While there is a place for serious drama on broadcast network television, if it contains adult content, it should be rated as appropriate for adults, not children or teenagers.



CONTENT EXAMPLES

The following dialogue was delivered by teenagers.

Sexual Dialogue

During Eric's trial for allegedly raping Taylor, lawyers question Taylor about his sex life and text messages.

Female Lawyer: "It starts, R U H?, Are you horny? I'm H, wish you could do something about it. When we go at it don't stop because I'm Q 2 C."

Male Lawyer: "Q2C. What does that mean? What does Q 2 C mean? What does Q2C mean?"

Taylor: "Quick to come."

Female Lawyer: "You wrote those texts to Eric. The texts about forced sex, rape."

Taylor: "That was just talk."

Female Lawyer: "It was like you were just flirting?"

Taylor: "Yeah."

Male Lawyer: "Who started the flirting?"

Taylor: "We both talked about it."

Male Lawyer: "So by the time you two, by the time you got together at the party, he knew that's what you liked?"

Taylor: "It was just something that i could think about."

Female Lawyer: "Had you ever previously had a sexual experience with another man?"

Taylor: "One other guy."

Female Lawyer: "This other guy, did you tell him your fantasies?"

Taylor: "I never told anybody before."

Female Lawyer: "Why Eric?"

Taylor: "Because Eric made me feel safe."

Male Lawyer: "You went to this party. You went to meet Eric."

Taylor: "I told you that."

Male lawyer: "He knew you liked aggressive contact. How is any of this rape?"

Taylor: "Because I never said yes! I never got to say yes. He gave me a drink, I started to feel sick. I couldn't control myself. It was like I was watching this happen to me. It was like I had to watch myself. It happened so fast, but it took forever to stop."

(*American Crime*, February 3, 21016, ABC, TV-14 DLSV)

Lawyers question Eric about his allegedly raping Taylor.

Male Lawyer: "Why did you two want to hook up at the party?"

Eric: "It turned Taylor on to kind of do it in public. Us getting off when everyone else is somewhere getting stupid."

Eric: "He was the one coming after me, telling me to do this to him do that to him."

Female Lawyer: "He was conscious the whole time?"

Eric: "He was buzzing but he knew what was going on."

Female Lawyer: "Did you provide him with alcohol?"

Eric: "No."



Female Lawyer: "Did you offer him anything to enhance the sex to make it feel better?"

Eric: "I didn't need to, he was in to it. He was telling me to hold him down, telling me to choke him. And then he wants me to unload. As soon as I do, he starts freaking out, you know, he gets all sad and scared like some bitch, who's sorry he got turned out. I don't know. I don't need to hear that so I was out. I come back and he's pants down ass up on the floor puking himself, everybody snapchatting his ass."

(*American Crime*, February 3, 21016, ABC, TV-14 DLSV)

Taylor's girlfriend Emy argue over Taylor's orientation.

Emy: "I see how you'd get a few beers in me and tell me to hard grind on you some. Was I supposed to be a boy to you? Is that why you did me like that? Is that why you're with me? Am I a boy to you?"

Emy slaps Taylor in the face and begins hitting him in the arm.

Emy: "You want I should go tell the police that you're a lying piece of (muted s**t)?"

(*American Crime*, February 3, 21016, ABC, TV-14 DLSV)

Luke becomes sexually violent with Taylor.

Luke: "For real, the only thing that happened to you is that you had a 3 a.m. hook up. Look, you went to hit it with some dude, got lit up and you freaked out, but nothing happened at that party you didn't want to happen."

Taylor: "You don't know what happened."

Luke: "Yeah? You don't like it rough? You don't like it when I do that?"

Luke begins choking Taylor and kissing him.

(*American Crime*, February 10, 2016, ABC, TV-14 DLV)

Kevin is angry at his basketball team's reaction to Taylor's alleged rape.

Kevin: For what, 'cause some dude gets off on dudes? And then we got the other team jawin' us like we some bitches. He came in there like some bitch trying to get turned out. Look, my mom told me, bitches always trying to play you, always. Always trying to play you, Kevin. And that dude is a straight bitch. He outed Eric, put my name out there. Bitches, man. Bitches just get to act how they act. And you can't do nothing. Except he's not a bitch. He's a dude. So there's no reason he can't get handled."

(*American Crime*, February 10, 2016, ABC, TV-14 DLV)



CONCLUSION

In today's world, children and teens are immersed in an ocean of media content, much of it generated by the broadcast networks. 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, while 77% stated that most of today's entertainment does not meet their expectations or reinforce the values important to them.

Children are influenced by depictions of other children in media, as cited above. Children hearing profanity in media increases the likelihood of children using such language themselves, potentially increasing their aggressive tendencies, and possibly getting them in trouble in school. Hearing sexual dialogue, particularly from other child and teenage characters, can desensitize children to inappropriate sexual conduct and can increase the odds of their early initiation of sexual behavior.

Yet the broadcast networks have inserted explicit and adult-themed humor into PG-rated, prime-time programs about families, which were created for families, aimed at families, and which air at times when families (including young children) are in the viewing audience. Particularly concerning, much of the sexual and expletive-laced dialogue is delivered by characters who are children themselves.

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 exposing young children to profanity and sexualized language constitutes "the public interest."

Network executives and others consistently defend the vast increase in offensive television content by saying, "If you don't like it, don't watch it," or "Use parental controls and the V-Chip to block it." But when programming which depicts teens and even children engaging in explicit sex talk and using profanity is rated TV-PG (appropriate for children under 14), the V-chip is inadequate to protect children

because it relies on the content ratings the networks assign to the shows the networks themselves produce.

The PTC calls on the broadcast networks to reconsider the content – and the content ratings -- for these programs, and all programs intended for child or “family” audiences, 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 that put inappropriate sexual and profane language into the mouths of teen and child characters without consideration for family viewers.

The broadcast networks can – and should – freely choose to maintain standards of common decency, rather than using the publicly-owned airwaves to air programming which normalizes the use of profanity and sexualized dialogue to unsuspecting viewers...especially children.

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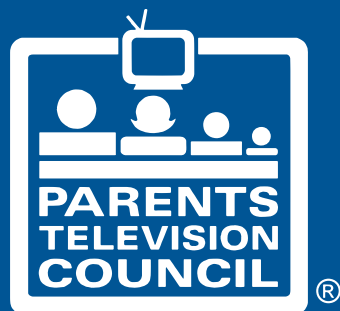
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