My Obsession

I have always had a fascination with sex, pretty much since I can remember. Not in the sense that I felt the need to have sex, but I wanted to know everything about it. When I was young I figured the only way I could learn about it, was to read about it. I had an older sister, so I read a lot of magazines, like Seventeen and Cosmopolitan. I had an obsession with the medical book my parents had. And I would ask my mom questions if need be. I personally never thought this was strange. Except maybe for the fact that I was in 4th or 5th grade. I guess you could say I was advanced for my age.

When I was in middle school, people accused me of being sexually active because I knew so much about sex. My thought was, “Hello, I am 13, why would I be having sex?” In hindsight, that was probably a really naïve thought. Sure, I wasn’t having sex, but there probably were kids getting it on at 13. I would like to think that maybe I passed some grand knowledge onto those kids that kept them out of trouble. Probably not, but it is a nice thought.

High school was a time when I think having that knowledge was useful in keeping myself from doing too many stupid things. I am not going to pretend like I was some saint that because I knew all of the things I knew, I was somehow better than everyone else. I made my share of mistakes, but I honestly think it could have been much worse, as it was for many of the people around me.
Fast forward 12 years, and I have yet to give up my sex obsession. I think the best part of it all is that my knowledge is always increasing from different experiences. I have worked in a job where all day I talked to people about how they can protect themselves during sex. My grad school education is all about reproductive health. I just can’t get enough!! I often think back to my days in middle and high school, and I am satisfied that while I might have been a bit of an outcast, or possibly the most interesting person there, I think it served me well.

Now, my obsession is less about attaining sexual knowledge, and more about giving that knowledge to others. Specifically, I want people to have knowledge about sex so they can have a healthy sex life. To that end, I am going to talk about sex from a perspective that many may not think about: how sex is shown on television.
When I was a teenager, I watched a lot of TV. My friends and I were big fans of those teen dramas, probably because our lives were rather mundane in comparison. One of our favorites was a little show called “Dawson’s Creek.” I actually refused to watch the show when it first started, mostly because I was trying to be contrary. Eighth grade for me was all about being contrary. However, I gave up quickly because it was, for lack of a better term, a soap opera, something that I have loved since the beginning of time.

Unlike your usual teen soap operas, this one seemed more realistic. I mean, how many kids could really relate to Beverly Hills 90210? Being from a small town always made that show seem a little off. The best part about “Dawson’s Creek” was how relatable the characters were. Joey was just so “girl next door,” and Dawson was like every dorky guy at school that was obsessed with something. Of course, Pacey was a man-whore, Jen was a whore-whore, and all of the parents were whacked out. Other than that, totally relatable. And I suppose someone watching related to the more salacious aspects of the show.

Whatever it was, I just loved watching the drama unfold every Wednesday night at 8pm. Because, in spite of how connected you felt to the characters, it was still so soapy. There was the ever-present Dawson-Joey-Pacey love triangle, Jen getting herself and everyone around her in trouble, and there was also Pacey’s crazy girlfriend and her crazy family. You know, things that in small amounts might actually occur in real life, but really they just make good television.
Now, I am a 25-year old grad student, which to some means I probably should not even have time to watch TV. But, I still love to watch. And probably my guiltiest pleasure is watching “Gossip Girl.” From what I understand, the target audience for this show is the same as my old favorite “Dawson’s Creek.” I mean, after all, it is about teens and their lives. Although this time, they are not small town, they are in New York City, and they go to private school. Ok, so maybe this show suffers from the same syndrome as the old “Beverly Hills 90210.” I think the difference this time around is that teens watching this show, for the most part, have lived more in this current decade than in the 90’s, and therefore have a different outlook on life. That and being inundated with “reality” TV would cause anyone to have a skewed perception of things. In other words, they really are not going to think about how realistic it truly is, as long as it is fun.

**How are these shows really different?**

Well, that was the question that I posed to myself when I began writing. I was going to sit here and write about how the kids from Capeside were saints compared to those New York City socialites. Really, when I break it down though, they were not that different.

When I watched “Dawson’s Creek”, I was a teenager, and I thought all of their turmoil was just like my life, only a little crazier. I mean I was in love with my best guy friend. I had a crappy relationship with a guy, all while denying my love for my best friend. I had friends that slept with the wrong guys (see, there was someone out there that could relate to Jen!). And I had guy friends who had strained relationships because of some girl. Really, is this any different from “Gossip Girl?”

Basically, you have the same characters, new setting. Serena is the wild child (Jen), Dan is the dork (Dawson), Vanessa is the old best friend (Joey), and Nate is the resident boy toy (Pacey). Ok, so there is Chuck and Blair, who maybe do not have a foil in Capeside, and a cast of
ancillary characters, all contributing to the crazy. And I will admit that the dynamics between the characters are not the same to start with, but the set-up is ultimately not treading any new ground. And you still have love triangles, affairs with older women, neurotic crazies, and parents who have no real concept of what is going on in their kid’s lives, save for when they get in trouble. Overall, not really different.

So why when I watch “Gossip Girl” do I miss my old pals Dawson and Joey? Why do I think what they are doing is so outrageous? I think it is because I am older. When I was watching “Dawson’s Creek” as a kid, I never really analyzed what was going on. I just sat back, watched, and enjoyed an hour away from life. Or, I might have sat and thought about how my life mirrored that on the television. Whatever I did, I was not thinking about if there was some message that was being sent to me through the television.

As an adult, I watch “Gossip Girl” and see the message that is being sent out. And guess what? That message is not what teens need to be seeing. If I am being honest, looking back with my adult eyes on, “Dawson’s Creek” did not present the best message to teens either. What message am I talking about? I am talking about the SEX message. Both shows have a certain level of promiscuous sex. The only thing that saves “Dawson’s Creek” is the occasional glimmer that someone is thinking about the target audience, while “Gossip Girl” only wants to titillate.

**Dawson Gossips about Sex**

Now, you are probably reading right now and thinking that I have lost it. I originally set out to show how “Gossip Girl” is worse than it’s teen television predecessors. But what I found was that sex was just as big in Capeside as it is in Manhattan.

Before Dawson and Joey even hit the WB network in 1998 (wow, that was a long time ago), reviewers were up in arms because of the sexual content of the show. Syndicated columnist
John Leo felt the show should be called “When Parents Cringe” due to, in just the first episode, the discussion of breasts, genitalia, masturbation, and penis size. The Parent’s Television Council (PTC) twice rated it the single worst program on television.

Contrast that with “Gossip Girl.” The second season of the show was prefaced by a summer ad campaign that used negative reviews of the show as promotion. “Mind-Blowingly Inappropriate” was the tag from the PTC. The PTC also named an episode from the first season as the worst show on television that week. Currently, the PTC ranks the show overall unsuitable for children, with their biggest beef being about the sexual content in the episodes.

What is the big deal about sex on TV?

Well, for me, there is nothing necessarily wrong about presenting sex on television. However, it is the way the media presents sex that poses a problem. On television, teens are exposed to about 15000 sexual references, with 80% of teen oriented shows having sexual content. Within this content, less than one-half of 1% shows any sexually healthy behavior. Overall, the media is devoid of any negative consequences of sexual behaviors. Seems pretty big to me. And I worry that teens today are going to emulate what they are seeing. Or maybe that they are truly behaving this way and we just do not know about it. (See “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Sexual Portrayals on TV”)

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Sexual Portrayals on TV-This section would be a separate box on the page, rather in the actual text

The Good?

There was the story arc in Season 4 of “Dawson’s Creek” where Joey goes to the free clinic, talks with Pacey about sex, and when they finally do have sex, a condom is shown. That was actually well done, except the visit to the free clinic was not realistic, and was a bit
combative. That might have actually made teens think that going to the clinic would be a scary thing. Not really the image you want to show to teens that might be having sex. Of course, that was the only positive thing that I can think of offhand that occurred. The rest of the time, it was the same as any other show.

The Bad

Now, you are reading this and going, “But Blair thought she was pregnant one time!” True, she did think she was pregnant, but that is only because she slept with two different people and did not know if protection was used. Supposedly, one person did use protection, but you never saw it on screen, it was just mentioned after the fact. Turns out she was not pregnant. Or maybe you older folk thought, “Dawson wrecked a boat after getting a blowjob!” Yeah, but the blowjob came from some girl he barely knew, and nothing was discussed except the wrecked boat.

The Ugly!

In all of my viewings of “Gossip Girl” I have yet to see something truly positive. I actually think it just gets more and more salacious as time goes on.

But does this really influence teens, or are you being paranoid? (Back to article text)

While I have been known to be paranoid from time to time, this is not the case this time around. In fact, most teens receive their information about sex from media, and the media has more impact on teens’ attitudes and beliefs about sex than other sources such as friends and teachers.

The RAND Corporation has done myriad studies dealing with teens, television, and sex. They have found that teens that watch greater amounts of sexual content on television are more likely to initiate intercourse earlier, and to engage in other non-coital (i.e. non-vaginal sex)
activities. These teens are also more likely to have a pregnancy before the age of 20! At the age of 25, the idea of already having a child that is 5 years old is just scary.

The most damaging of all of this information, in my opinion, comes from the fact that even if a television show only discusses sex, but does not, in fact, physically depict the act, teens are still just as likely to engage in sexual behaviors. It sounds really crazy, but if you think about it, if you are constantly hearing about sex everywhere, especially from the mouths of characters that are supposed to be the same age as you, you are bound to feel like this is just something you are supposed to do.

So, what this tells me is that even though “Dawson’s Creek” was really more about sexual dialogue, it still had just as large of an impact on teens as a show like “Gossip Girl,” that is a little more physical.

**Ok, but what does this have to do with health?**

Think about it. If teens are greatly impacted by what they see on TV, and everyone on TV just goes out and has sex without any discussion of what precautions to use, or what the consequences of their actions might be, then teens are more than likely doing the same thing.

Unprotected sex leads to many health problems, including sexually transmitted infections (STI). STIs, such as Chlamydia and Gonorrhea, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease as well as infertility. Viral STIs, like Herpes, Human Papilloma Virus (HPV), and HIV can only be treated, and are not curable. As we all probably know by now, thanks to the advent of the Gardasil vaccine and the subsequent promotion surrounding it, HPV is the leading cause of cervical cancer among women. While those infected with HIV now have the ability to take medications to help slow the progression of the disease, many do not have access to these
medications, and their lives are forever effected by the disease. (See “Adolescent Health Stats: The Lowdown on Down Below”)

**Adolescent Health Stats: The Lowdown on Down Below-Text box outside of regular text of article**

Earlier this year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) published results on the sexual health of persons aged 10-24 years. The major findings were that negative outcomes of sexual behavior, such as pregnancy and STI, which were on the decline for many years, have begun to rise again, and condom use is now starting to decline as well. To put some numbers to that:

- In 2006, about 1 million adolescents and young adults 10-24 had been infected with either Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, or Syphilis. (One million!!! That is a lot of people)
- Initiation of intercourse- 30% of females 15-17 reported having ever had vaginal intercourse.
- 5% of those females 15-19 admitted to having between 6-9 sexual partners.
- 42% of females 15-17 admitted to having oral sex with a partner
- For females 15-19, condom use at first intercourse was 67.5%, compared to intercourse in the last 3 months at 54.3%
- For females 15-19 who have had sex in the last 4 weeks, 41.9% said they always used a condom, whereas 42.5% said they never used one
- More than half of the females had discussed some aspect of sex, such as how to say no and contraceptive methods, with their parents

Well, where do we go from here?

As the evidence shows, teens are indeed engaging in sexual behaviors. And this is nothing new. As the old saying goes, “Your generation didn’t invent sex!” But I think the problem lies in the issues surrounding it, such as unprotected intercourse and number of sexual partners. The fact that teens are apparently talking to their parents about sex, and are still engaging in unsafe sexual behaviors points me back to outside influences on their behavior.

No, I am not saying we should stop watching television, or that shows should be overly preachy. 7th Heaven is not for everyone. What I would like to see is maybe make it more realistic. Keep the crazies and the love triangles, but insert more candid discussions of sex into the episodes. In the real world, unless you are completely wasted, you are going to talk to your partner at some point about sex. So, putting it in a show about teens would not take away from the entertainment value.

Of course, we as viewers, other than complaining, really cannot control what the studios do. So, I suggest involving your parents more. When you talk to your parents about sex, listen to what they are saying. And maybe they should watch an episode or two of “Gossip Girl” so they know what they are competing against. My mom always watched TV with me and pointed out when something was totally ridiculous.

In the end, the messages that are put out by the media are just messages. You do not have to listen to the message and do what it tells you to. But you do have to acknowledge its
existence, if only to keep yourself out of trouble. Remember, my teen television experience was no different than yours today you just need to realize when realism stops and fantasy begins.