



SADD Op-Ed:

Shock and Awe

Media target teens with weapons of mass persuasion

By Stephen G. Wallace

In its most recent assault on the hearts and minds of adolescent America, Hollywood's entertainment juggernaut has unleashed *The Real Cancun*, a spring-break-run-amok spectacle from New Line Cinema. The latest in envelope-pushing reality television and film (*The Quest* and *From Justin and Kelly* follow), this titillating tale follows a battalion of fresh-faced college kids romping through a Mexican party-playground filled with endless opportunities for self-destructive behavior. Dubbed the "16 party animals who put the 'can' in Cancun," these uninhibited "cast members" are on a mission of sorts – seemingly oblivious to the potential consequences of their quest, not to mention any collateral damage they might inflict along the way.

That exploitive and exploited conduct by teens and young adults – egged on and paid off by Hollywood studios – passes for entertainment says a lot about, well ... entertainment. That it is spun as reality strains credulity and perpetuates the social norming of dangerous, even aberrant, behavior.

The natural proclivity for limit-testing in adolescence needs balance. And movies like this don't help. Nor do countless other media vehicles that deliver daily doses of madness and mayhem, making them seem part of the plan for healthy human development. To the contrary, deployment of these most powerful weapons of mass persuasion walks youth down a dangerous path of indulgence, overgrown with the underbrush of self-deceit that obscures the longer term physical, social and emotional ramifications of what may now at least seem like a good idea.

Just as there are "unknown unknowns" in war, there are unknown unknowns in life, too ... especially when the boundaries of social and sexual behavior are so boldly tested by young adults, some just months out of (or, in other cases, even into) high school. Some of the Cancun cast publicly professes personal and parental pride at their participation. Still, one can't help but wonder how they will feel in the cold, hard, sober light of maturity, knowing that their alcohol-influenced indiscretions have been digitally captured for all, including maybe someday their kids, to see.

Media promotion of supposed precursors to modern day happiness leaves many young adults susceptible to self-defeating thoughts and actions. Drinking, drugs, sex and violence portrayed in songs, sitcoms and movies indelibly mark young minds. Content equals consequence. And sadly, there's no shortage of content ... especially when it comes to sex.

A newly released study conducted at the University of California, Santa Barbara found that:

- Two-thirds of all television shows (64%) have some sexual content, including one in three (32%) with sexual behaviors.
- One in seven shows (14%) now includes sexual intercourse.
- In the top 20 shows among teen viewers, eight in ten episodes included some sexual content (83%), including one in five (20%) with sexual intercourse.

Adolescent physician Meg Meeker, author of *Epidemic, How Teen Sex is Killing Our Kids*, confirms our intuition that teens soak up those sexual messages like a sponge. To wit, a 14-year-old



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girl told me the other day that media plays a big role in teen decision-making, sending the message that "sex is good." Similarly, a 15-year-old boy said that television, movies and music add to the pressure of wanting to have sex, "They portray how men should be masculine and hook up with women," he explained. Another girl, a high school senior interviewed for the May edition of Boston magazine, said, "It's all sex all the time all around you. And you think, maybe that's what I should be doing."

Also alarming are reports of "ratings creep," a push by filmmakers for PG-13 ratings, which are more commercially viable than R-ratings, and for R-ratings as opposed to NC-17-ratings for films with extreme content. Why the concern? A Federal Trade Commission report found that 80% of the R-rated films it studied were marketed to children under the age of 17. In addition, its test of theaters' enforcement of access to R-rated films found that unaccompanied children ages 13-16 were able to purchase tickets to R-rated films 46% of the time.

Increasingly documented casual, anonymous, group, even public sexual behavior by middle and high school students only underscores the deleterious effects of such early exposure to intimacy, especially when it is bereft of context, meaning or outcome. It should not go unnoticed that a majority of both boys and girls who are sexually active wish they had waited, nor that as many as one in four has a potentially life-altering sexually transmitted disease. Underage drinking, drug use and violence likely have ties to mass media as well. But not all the news is bad. Some kids are making good decisions ... and so are some adults: television producers Arnold Shapiro and Allison Grodner ("Teen Files," "Flipped") were recently honored by the national SADD organization for their work in bringing important youth-oriented topics to the forefront in a responsible, realistic way. Now if only all the others would follow suit.

Long has raged public and private debate about the impact – and efficacy – of media messages aimed at youth. But one thing is certain: repeated exposure to amoral, immoral or just plain stupid behavior by those with whom young people identify routes thinking and, ultimately, behavior. Whether delivered through movies, television, computers, or CDs, communication that portrays alcohol and drugs as fun, sex as unimportant, and violence as remedial creates a monumental divide between what many parents teach and what many teens, unfortunately, believe.

Stephen Wallace is the national chairman/chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. He has extensive experience working with youth as a school psychologist, camp director, and public speaker in addition to his many years with SADD. SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions/Students Against Driving Drunk) sponsors school-based education and prevention programs SADD sponsors school-based education and prevention programs nationwide. For more information about SADD, visit www.saddonline.com.

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