



SADD Op-Ed:

Janet and Justin
The Wardrobe Malfunction Meltdown

By Stephen G. Wallace

February 1 , 2004

Denials, apologies, explanations and investigations notwithstanding, the real legacy of Super Bowl XXXVIII is as true as Adam Vinatieri's game winning field goal: a "wardrobe malfunction" of staggering proportions. Less so because of the baring of breast than the misogynistic message electronically transmitted to children by two popular performers no doubt looked to as role models and examples of success.

The lyrics, choreography and nudity in Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake's halftime show inspired outrage among countless fans and families who thought they were watching a youth-friendly sporting event celebrating hard work, teamwork, sacrifice and reward. But the sexualizing of most every aspect of modern-day marketing, even of the Super Bowl, shouldn't obscure the normalizing of a debasing – if simulated – sexual assault.

Over the past twenty years, we have witnessed unparalleled advances in the education of young people (especially boys) about important gender issues, not the least of which is respect for sexual, physical and psychological boundaries. On Super Bowl Sunday, years of dialogue were dashed in a drumbeat.

Layered with adult-sized entertainment and wrapped in advertising extolling the virtues of alcohol and sex, the modern-day Super Bowl broadcast, like so much other TV fare, has become an amalgam of poor taste, poor programming and poor stewardship of adults' responsibility to youth. One pundit calls it the NFL's "deal with the devil" in pursuit of higher ratings. Sadly, the NFL is not alone, especially when it comes to sex.

A 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.

So, what's the harm? Too often, and too early, young people are given the message that having sex, whatever the cost, is not worth waiting for. Unfortunately, they're paying attention. New Teens Today research from SADD and Liberty Mutual Group reveals that nearly half of teens are sexually active, including 60.9% of 15- to 17-year-olds and 12.6% of 11- to 12-year-olds.

A sense of urgency combined with a lack of self-control can be catastrophic.

Statistics from the US Department of Health and Human Services Centers for Disease Control (CDC) show that each year approximately three million cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) occur among teenagers and that approximately 860,000 teenagers become pregnant. The CDC also reports that 1,688 young people (ages 13 to 24) were reported with AIDS in 2000, bringing the cumulative total to 31,293 cases of AIDS in this age group.

As if STDs, pregnancies and AIDS weren't enough to worry about, the Teens Today research



SADD Op-Ed:

Janet and Justin

The Wardrobe Malfunction Meltdown

makes clear that such early sexual behavior is also linked to higher rates of stress and depression, which happen to correlate with alcohol and drug use – often precursors themselves of sexual activity and sexual violence. And that’s where things get really ugly.

In 2002, the Massachusetts Task Force on Sexual Assault and Abuse reported that:

- One in five Massachusetts high school girls is physically and/or sexually abused by a date;
- More than half of women who report being raped at some point in their lives were under the age of 18 at the time of the assault;
- A young woman’s year of greatest risk for sexual assault is age 14. The task force also noted that sexual assault could negatively impact one’s lifelong physical and mental health.

To be certain, some adults will dispute the link between what teens see on television and their decisions about behavior. But the teens themselves say something different. According to *Teens, Sex and TV*, a survey conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and *US News & World Report*, 72% of 15- to 17-year-olds believe that sexual content on TV influences the behavior of kids their age, with 22% reporting it influences their own behavior.

It might make sense for adults to stop wondering why teens do the things they often do and listen to their explanations instead. It might make more sense to keep them away from some television programming in the first place.

The Janet and Justin imbroglio is just the latest, and most high profile, example of the media-driven economic imperative that sacrifices youth on the altar of commerce. Let’s face it: sex sells. The question is if the kids know what they’re buying.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc., has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. He recently served as a member of the Massachusetts Task Force on Sexual Assault and Abuse. For more information on the SADD/Liberty Mutual Teens Today research, visit www.saddonline.com or www.libertymutualinsurance.com.

© Summit Communications Management Corporation
2004 All Rights Reserved