

Media Literacy and Prevention: Going Beyond “Just Say No”

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by Lynda Bergsma, Ph.D.

The Influence of Our Media Culture on Health Behavior

Today most prevention practitioners and researchers, as well as concerned teachers and parents, recognize that many of the messages we get from the media are risk factors for numerous public health problems. From the time we wake up to the radio alarm clock to the time we fall asleep with the TV on, we live in a media culture. We cannot escape the media’s influence on either our healthy or unhealthy behaviors.

Numerous studies over the past five decades have examined the impact of media on children, with regard to such risky behaviors as violence; alcohol, tobacco, and other drug abuse; poor body image and eating disorders; precocious, unsafe sexual activity; and teen pregnancy. More than 1,000 studies have looked at the effects of violence in television and movies, including the three-year National Television Violence Study completed in 1998. Most of these studies conclude that children who watch significant amounts of television and movie violence are more likely than children who see less media violence to exhibit aggressive behavior, attitudes, and values.¹ A study of ninth graders in San Jose, California, found that increased television and music video viewing are risk factors for the onset of alcohol use in adolescents. The study recommended that attempts to prevent adolescent alcohol use should address the adverse influences of alcohol use in the media.² Another study found that seventh- and ninth-

graders were more likely to approve of premarital sex after watching MTV for less than one hour.³

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The media are so pervasive that youth, in particular, do not perceive their influence. The original media guru, Marshall McLuhan, once said that we don’t know who first discovered water, but it probably wasn’t the fish. And leading media influence activist Jean Kilbourne says ironically that young boys wearing Budweiser caps often tell her that the media don’t influence them.⁴ Youth consistently underestimate the media’s influence on them. A May 2002 survey on teens, sex and TV shows that nearly three out of four (72%) teens think sex on TV influences the sexual behaviors of kids their age “somewhat” or “a lot”; but just one in four (22%) think it influences their own behavior.⁵ Influences are all the more powerful when we do not readily perceive them and cannot erect mental barriers against them.

Besides the pervasiveness of the media, there are neurological reasons that we do not perceive the influence of the media. Brain research demonstrates that we respond to images (the stock and trade of the mass communications media) differently than we respond to print. When we read books, we process the text in the neocortex (the higher cognitive thinking levels of the brain), and the process is slow and thoughtful. When we process images, we do it in the limbic system (a part of the brain so old that it is called the reptilian system), and the process is very rapid, through instinct, impulse, and emotion. This is the same part of the brain that produces the fight-or-flight response, which gets our adrenalin pumping without our conscious thought.

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So, for example, when I have had my dinner and my tummy is nice and full, and I sit down to watch a little TV and see an ad for pizza, how do I respond? Do I process the image in my neocortex as follows: “What pizza company is advertising? It looks so juicy that they must have put at least double cheese on there and painted a little oil on it to make it look shiny for the videotaping. Even though I’ve just had my supper and I don’t really want anything to eat, what are the techniques the ad is using to make me want that pizza?” Or do I process the image in my limbic system, where my rapid, instinctual, physical response is to salivate without even thinking and my irrational impulse is to want that pizza now, even though I’m not the least bit hungry?

The first response is what we call a critical thinking response. Critical thinking is essential to media literacy as a prevention strategy. The goal of media literacy in prevention is to move our responses to media images out of the limbic system and into the neocortex, where we can respond more thoughtfully and carefully to the messages the images are giving us. Media literacy allows youth to reflect on important life choices and make decisions about their health behaviors. It allows young

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Some of my recent curriculum evaluation research in media literacy and tobacco use prevention clearly demonstrates how much youth need media literacy information and skills.⁶ We pre- and posttested 589 middle-school students to measure their knowledge before and after implementing the *Blowing Smoke* program, a media literacy-based curriculum of five lessons designed to discover and analyze the influence of tobacco use images in movies popular with youth. The pretest baseline measures were most revealing. Thirty percent of the students were aware of tobacco portrayal in the movies, and 35 percent already had negative attitudes about tobacco use in the movies. They gain such knowledge and attitudes from many tobacco use prevention programs. But only 18 percent of the students had some understanding that tobacco product placement in movies is really advertising and does not happen by chance. The rest thought that, unlike TV, movies were free of advertising. Media literacy knowledge and skills are required to identify examples of product placement and understand the concept – that it is a kind of stealth advertising and that it has economic support and outcomes.

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Public Health Prevention Perspective 101

The goal of prevention in public health is to stop or moderate major human dysfunctions. Prevention efforts try to counteract the potential precursors of dysfunction, called *risk factors*, and reinforce the potential precursors of health, called *protective factors*. Risk factors are variables, such as poor school performance, that are associated with a high probability of developing risky behaviors. Protective factors refer to conditions, such as having media literacy skills, that improve people's resistance to risk factors.

Prevention Approaches

Traditional prevention approaches, including social marketing through the media and intervention programs like Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE), focus on changing individual behavior. From this perspective, risk factors are in the individual. The obese person, for example, is viewed as lacking the willpower to say no to food and to exercise more frequently. The individual approach places most of its emphasis on providing education, knowledge, and skills to help people say no. Unfortunately, this approach has proved to be too simplistic and woefully inadequate. This is evidenced by the fact that even though they receive lots of information from their schools and the media about the unhealthy consequences of tobacco use, 6,000 young people try a cigarette each day, and 3,000 go on to be regular smokers.⁷

Today's prevention models keep traditional/individual approaches in the prevention toolbox, but they emphasize the environmental, social, political, and cultural factors that encourage risky behavior and act as barriers to changing individual risky behavior. The media constitute just such a factor. Television, radio, movies, magazines, the Internet, videogames, billboards, and bumper stickers fill our environment with social, political, and cultural messages – some healthy and many unhealthy. Successful prevention strategies must address the influence of the media, as well as attempt to change individual behavior. For example, while encouraging the potentially obese child to decrease energy intake and increase energy expenditure, we could also take some of the following actions, many of which are drawn from a much longer list recommended by Nestle and Jacobson.⁸

- Restrict advertising of high-calorie, low-nutrient foods on television shows commonly watched by children, or require broadcasters to provide equal time for

messages promoting healthy eating and physical activity.

- Require print advertisements to disclose the calorie content of the foods they are marketing.
- Eliminate the sale of soft drinks, candy bars, and foods high in calories, fat, or sugars in schools.
- Integrate media literacy throughout the comprehensive health curriculum standards in each state, as well as other appropriate curricular areas such as language arts and social studies.
- Require and fund daily physical education and sports programs in primary and secondary schools.
- Provide funding and other incentives for bicycle paths, recreation centers, swimming pools, safe parks, and sidewalks.
- Levy city, state, or federal taxes on soft drinks and other foods high in calories, fat, or sugar to fund a campaign for good nutrition and physical activity – the approach used in tobacco use prevention.

We have a lot to learn in the science of prevention, but one thing we do know is that it is a complex subject requiring complex solutions. As a result, prevention is a difficult practice for many people, including legislators and policymakers, who are looking for a “quick fix” at the lowest cost.

Media Literacy as a Prevention Strategy

Studying the long-term effects of teaching students media literacy skills is a complex and expensive task. We need much more research in the area of media literacy education and prevention. Some of the short-term research and an abundance of anecdotal evidence from teachers, parents, media literacy professionals, and prevention specialists, however, suggest that media literacy works.

Media literacy helps children and adolescents gain skills to intelligently navigate the media and filter the hundreds of messages they receive every day. Simply put, media literacy is the ability to “ask questions about what you watch, see and read.” Media literacy can help youth understand how media are developed, the approaches used to increase persuasion, the commercial sources and beneficiaries of advertising, and the ideology of messages contained in commercial and news media.⁹

When they recognize how media messages influence them, students can develop the skills they need to

carefully reflect on the messages that portray risky lifestyle choices like smoking as glamorous, rebellious, or “cool.” Interestingly, my own research with youth and discussions with media literacy educators suggest that simply telling youth that they are influenced by the media doesn’t work. They must have the chance to explore the concept under the guidance of teachers and parents who fully understand the concepts of media literacy and have the patience to allow youth to discover for themselves the extent to which they are influenced by the media. This process can be facilitated through a number of media literacy exercises that lead students through the process of personal discovery.

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It is exasperating to see youngsters’ eyes glaze over when someone tells them that they are influenced by the media and exciting to see the light come on in their eyes when they go through a co-learning process with a teacher/facilitator to discover the influence of media for themselves. On one of my research projects, I asked a young college girl to facilitate small groups of girls aged 13 to 15 years to focus on the influence of media on their ideas about romance, love, and relationships between men and women. During the early focus groups she tended to *tell* the girls that they were influenced by the media, but they resisted this idea so vociferously that it interfered with the whole focus of the group. They could not get past GO. So we worked together to develop better listening and probing strategies to help the girls discover for themselves the amount of influence they received from the media. When the facilitator used these strategies in subsequent groups, the girls were not so resistant and were much better able to analyze the media messages they were getting about male/female relationships and how much their own behavior and ideas were influenced by them. It was an “aha” moment.

When youth learn to analyze the messages communicated by advertising, entertainment, and news

media, they can uncover the values and points of view embedded in the messages and decide whether to accept or reject them. Learning to evaluate messages for accuracy, reliability, purpose, and bias gives students better information and tools with which to make decisions about their health risk behaviors. This is the focus of a number of comprehensive health curriculum standards in many states. In the short term, we believe that media knowledge and literacy skills will better enable youth to make healthy choices, even in the face of the barrage of unhealthy messages they receive from the media. In the long term, those in the media literacy movement in the United States believe that if we become a media-literate population and thus change the way we respond to the media, the media will also change for the better.

You must be media literate to help children be media literate. Teachers and parents must become media literate themselves so they can guide the development of media literacy in their students and children.

What Can You Do?

In the 2002 movie *Simone*, Al Pacino’s character says to his digitized, virtual actress creation, Simone, “We have entered into a new dimension. Our ability to manufacture fraud has exceeded our ability to detect it.” To which Simone replies, “I am the death of real.” What can teachers, parents, and prevention specialists do to help children and adolescents navigate this kind of media culture? In its definition of media literacy, the Alliance for a Media Literate America declares that “Media literacy [is] an essential life-skill for the 21st century .”¹⁰ Here are some suggestions for fostering that skill in our young people.

- **You must be media literate to help children be media literate.** Teachers and parents must become media literate themselves so they can guide the development of media literacy in their students and children. Recognize that media literacy is a critical thinking life skill that requires significant learning and practice time to master. Even though the media may seem trivial sometimes, it is no trivial task to become media literate. For information, ideas, and resources,

start by checking out the following websites: www.medialit.org, www.media-awareness.ca, and www.amlainfo.org.

- **Familiarize yourself with youth media and culture.** Listen to their music, look at the websites they frequent, watch what they are watching on TV, and go to a teen movie once in a while. This will help you keep up with the rapidly changing world of youth media and culture and will give you credibility when you talk to kids about media and media literacy. You can also learn a lot about the media from youngsters. Take a co-learning approach to media literacy. In my workshops with both adults and youth, I often find they have more to teach me than I have to teach them.
- **Remember that media literacy is not media bashing.** Feel free to acknowledge your pleasure and that of youth in media use. Youth culture, especially, is closely identified with media and pop culture. Adults must validate and acknowledge young people's experiences and familiarity with their media culture before youth will accept and apply media literacy skills to the messages they consume daily.
- **Start media literacy as soon as children start watching TV.** Parents should start early with their children to experience media together and begin rudimentary analysis. Children are especially vulnerable to the impact of advertising. A recent study out of Stanford University found that one 30-second commercial can influence the brand choices of children as young as two years, and repeated exposures to ads are even more effective. Monitor your child's media consumption and engage in a continuing dialogue about the media messages. Ask them how an ad is different from a program and discuss the purpose of each. Talk to them about their favorite characters' actions and the real-life consequences of those actions, which are often not seen in the media. Help them distinguish between what is real and what is not. Watching five bears on the screen all dancing in unison, my four-year-old son asked his father, "Daddy, which one is the real bear?" He was already media literate enough to suspect that there was one real bear and the others were copies.
- **Integrate media literacy skills in all curricular areas.** Language arts, social studies, and health are particularly appropriate, but media literacy skills have a place in history, geography, math, and science. A wonderful resource is *12 Basic Principals for Incorporating Media Literacy into any Curriculum* from

Project Look Sharp at Ithaca College (<http://www.ithaca.edu/looksharp>). Teachers can also view media literacy-based lessons for all curricular areas at www.media-awareness.ca.

- **Get kids involved in media production.** Creating and producing their own media messages is a powerful strategy for helping youth internalize media literacy skills. This activity can be a "hook" to get them involved in media literacy and prevention programs. Put a video or still camera in their hands, give them an audio recorder, and teach them how to use software programs for creating graphics, animating, and editing. As they make media messages, guide them in the principles of media literacy that fit in with their experiences.
- **Give youth the power to make healthy decisions.** Not all kids are influenced by media messages in the same way. Nor are they passive dupes who are victimized by the media. Children bring different backgrounds to their experiences with the media, and they construct their own values and beliefs in active negotiation with these messages. Help them realize their power to accept healthy media messages, challenge unhealthy messages, and make good decisions for themselves.

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